

# detoxifying school accountability the case for multi-perspective inspection

James Park

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# DETOXIFYING SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

James Park

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### About the author

James Park is a writer and organisational consultant. He was the founder-director of Antidote (1997–2012), a charity formed as a campaign for emotional literacy which went on to develop the PROGRESS process as a way of ‘involving everyone in making their school great’. He is currently PROGRESS Director of Human Scale Education.

Recent publications are *The Emotional Literacy Handbook* and *The Emotional Literacy Pocketbook*. His other books include *Sons, Mothers and Other Lovers*; *Cultural Icons: Key figures of the late 20th century*; *Shrinks: The analysts analyzed* and *Learning to Dream: The new British cinema*.

He went to the same school as Kenneth Baker, the deviser of the National Curriculum, and was taught by some of the same teachers. He reached a different conclusion, though, about the relevance of the school’s pedagogy to the broader educational system.

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It is to Cilla that this report is dedicated.

James Park  
May 2013

# 1 Executive summary

This report is concerned with target-driven accountability in the English education system: principally, the Ofsted inspection regime, tests and school league tables.

For the past 20 years, school leaders and teachers have been subject to this regime in one form or another. Many of them find that the need to focus on these targets holds them back from providing a good, well-rounded education for their students. Others argue that, whatever the negative consequences, the current system is needed to raise standards in education and ensure that all children receive a good education.

This report strongly argues that the current model of accountability is profoundly toxic and is failing to achieve its stated goal of improving education. It sets out an alternative regime, which would allow all children to achieve their potential, while ensuring the quality of education in schools is of a high standard.

The school accountability system in England has a toxic impact on four key groups of people:

- *School leaders*, who must focus their attention on achieving targets, rather than ensuring that the young people in their charge receive a fulfilling education. The assumption that these things are always the same as each other is false.
- *Teachers* are also under pressure to make professional compromises, as the challenge of stimulating powerful learning in children and young people has to be carried forward with one eye on the accountability process.
- *Children and young people* feel responsible, through their performance in tests, for the judgements that are made about



their schools, which can have negative consequences for their opinion of themselves and their potential.

- *Policymakers* feel the need continuously to tinker with the system in order to avoid its current perverse outcomes and try getting it to achieve the intended goals.

The report draws on international evidence to argue that trust within a school – between senior leadership, teachers, students and parents – improves educational outcomes. The current accountability system is based on management and control; it assumes a lack of trust and does nothing to build it.

Originally developed in response to a breakdown in trust between education professionals, policymakers and the wider public, the system sets the judgements of inspectors against those of students, staff and other school stakeholders, and allows their singular voice to dominate.

The report argues that valuing student choice in assessment and introducing a multi-perspective approach to inspection would lead to a system that proceeded through dialogue and reflection rather than imposed judgements. This would de-toxify assessment and accountability by engaging all key stakeholders in shaping:

- an agreed set of priorities and goals that are consistent with broad societal expectations regarding the core purposes of education
- a coherent strategy for achieving these educational aims
- a clear, evidence-based account for the wider public of what is strong in their schools that needs to be built on and what is less strong that needs to be addressed if they are to move forward.

## Recommendations

The report makes two key recommendations:

- *Empower students* by radically increasing the available choice of tests and qualifications at the end of Key Stage 2 (ages 10–11) and Key Stage 4 (ages 15–16), and enabling them to choose those that will best display their knowledge and skills.
- *Move towards an accountability system built around multi-perspective inspection*, to value the perspectives that leaders, staff, students, parents and inspectors have about a school's performance, instead of allowing the judgements of one group to prevail against those of others.

### Recommendation 1 Standards without standardisation

The first proposal calls on the government to promote student choice by ceasing to define what qualifications young people should acquire. A suggested method is as follows:

- Policymakers would continue to decide the breadth and scope of what is taught in schools to children up to the age of 14 (or even beyond) by coordinating the design of the National Curriculum.
- Qualification providers would be freed up to design different ways of testing knowledge in National Curriculum subjects, with the leeway to offer learners a range of avenues through which to display their knowledge and skills.
- Each of these tests would have within them a section that assessed the levels of student ability to use numbers, comprehend what they are reading and deploy language, so that schools' effectiveness at ensuring children and young people have these fundamental skills continues to be transparent.
- Ofqual would no longer ensure all qualifications measure the same thing in the same way, instead specifying how these qualifications are different from each other and ensuring that there was some measure of comparability between qualifications.

- Parents, teachers and children would be free to decide which areas of the National Curriculum individual students were to be tested on at the end of Key Stage 2 (when they are 10–11), and which tests are going to be used for this purpose. This would enable children to follow their particular interests, while enjoying a broad curriculum and displaying their knowledge in ways that reflect their preferred ways of learning.
- At Key Stage 4 (when they are 15–16), students would be free to build the qualification portfolios they consider will most powerfully display their talents to further and higher education institutions, or potential employers, without having to worry about whether they are making choices that will contribute to their school's rankings in league tables.

Beyond the benefit this would have in allowing students to pursue their education according to their own needs, the report identifies two additional benefits.

First, by making comparisons between schools so much more difficult, such an approach would make more apparent the inherent limitations of using the performance of children in tests to measure the quality of a school's teaching and leadership. This would not prevent 'league tables', but the complexity of the sorting task would make it much more likely that the tables they came up with would have some degree of shading and nuance.

Second, a wider range of qualifications would provide better quality information in ways that enable good choices to be made. The report proposes establishing a central databank that brings together up-to-date accounts of the specific knowledge and skills measured by different qualifications, alongside the opportunities they open up for people in further and higher education, as well as the workplace. The usefulness of such a databank could be reinforced over time by including information on the progress of each student through education and into the world of work, gathered perhaps through the National Insurance system for a decade or more after they have left school.

Equipped with such a vast mine of easily accessible information, young people would be able to negotiate their pathways towards particular real-life goals, engaging from early on in a conversation involving parents, teachers, coaches and mentors about what they need to learn and why they need to learn it. Such a dialogue would be more likely to lead to a good match between the expectations of colleges, universities and employers and what young people have to offer than the current system.

### **Recommendation 2 Multi-perspective inspection**

The second proposal advocates an alternative to the current method of school inspection, instead recommending a dialogue between all key stakeholders.

The approach – called multi-perspective inspection – would work as follows:

- Collect data annually from staff, students and parents about how their experience of the school impacts on the quality of teaching and learning.
- Use the data to inform in-depth conversations involving all the school's stakeholders about what the data mean and how they demonstrate ways in which the school can improve teaching and learning.
- Publish reports that provide an honest account of what is strong and what is less strong in the school, together with its strategy for making things even better.

This argument is rooted in work on development of the PROGRESS process, carried out by the charity Antidote with around 90 primary and secondary schools. This has demonstrated how giving the whole school community the opportunity to analyse the factors that get in the way of great learning, and to come up with ideas for making things even better can inform the development of strategic and effective approaches to the improvement of teaching and learning.

These are the key advantages of this approach:

- The analysis and the solutions would be generated from within the school, rather than being imposed on the school. They would therefore be much more likely to gain the support of the whole school community.
- Carried out at least once a year, the collection of data would enable schools to generate much more up-to-date accounts of themselves than are made available to parents and other stakeholders through the current Ofsted process. The reports would also be deeper and more responsive to what parents wanted to know because parents would be involved in their creation.
- The collection of data would enable the school to model the sort of robust learning skills that will serve young people best as they move into adult life – such as grappling with complexity rather than making do with simplistic accounts of things and working collaboratively together to achieve shared goals.
- It would integrate the processes of research into the daily life of teachers and other staff, providing greater opportunities for best practice to be discussed and shared.
- mobilise powerful creative energy across the school community that could be channelled in ways that ensured all schools were on a path to steady improvement, and all children and young people were offered the best possible opportunities to learn and grow.

## Conclusion

Taken together these changes to the assessment and accountability system would:

- help to ensure that all young people had a rich experience of learning, which enabled them to develop a portfolio of useful skills
- generate richer, more revealing and more useful accounts of each school's strengths and weaknesses

## 2 Introduction

For 20 years headteachers and teachers have been feeling beleaguered by the tests, league tables, targets and inspections associated with the school accountability and assessment system. Many have expressed concern that these prevented them from offering all young people the deep and rounded education they need if they are to have successful lives.

Some argue in response that the system we have now is needed to raise standards in education, so any negative effects are a price worth paying. Successive governments have made changes to details – new approaches to tests, statistical measures, targets and inspection – without being able to assuage concerns about the impact of the system. This report argues that the design of the assessment and accountability system is, in reality, toxic to the life chances of children and young people. It also puts at risk whatever gains have been achieved from allocating more autonomy to schools through the Academies Programme.<sup>1</sup>

The report goes on to describe the principles around which an alternative system might be developed that would put qualification choice at the heart of assessment, and radically increase the amount of accountability while fundamentally changing its nature. This argument is rooted in work on development of the PROGRESS Process, carried out by the charity Antidote<sup>2</sup> with around 90 primary and secondary schools. This has demonstrated how giving the whole school community the opportunity to analyse the factors that get in the way of great learning, and to come up with ideas for making things even better, can inform the development of strategic and effective approaches to the improvement of teaching and learning.

This report is being published to coincide with the launch of a free online version of the PROGRESS Diagnostic for schools, to be found at [www.progress-hse.org](http://www.progress-hse.org)

### 3 A toxic system

Some 20 years have elapsed since John Major's government set up the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) to take over routine inspection of schools from Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and inject more rigour and transparency into the process. Education Secretary Kenneth Clarke declared at the time that his intention was to 'take the mystery out of education' and enable parents to make informed choices about the schools their children attended.

It was around the same time that the government first published secondary school examination results to further open up the 'secret garden' that education had become. This led to the first league tables appearing in the national press. The publication of primary school results followed five years later.

These developments were a response to concerns about the quality of England's schools. It was felt that teachers were pursuing approaches that did not equip young people with the skills they needed to thrive in the modern world, and that the inspection process was complicit in letting this happen. A new approach was sought that, by providing parents with more information, would challenge everyone to deliver higher levels of performance.<sup>3</sup>

Since 1992, various attempts have also been made to increase the sophistication of league tables. There have also been frequent changes in what Ofsted inspectors are expected to focus on, how long they spend in each school and how much notice they give of their arrival. And there have been dramatic shifts too in the degree to which the various chief inspectors have been willing to present themselves as partners of the teaching profession, while remaining vigilant in pursuit of poor performance.

In 2005, the fourth chief inspector, David Bell, argued that the form of external evaluation provided by Ofsted was ‘here to stay’ because it acted as a ‘catalyst for improvement’. He said that Ofsted inspections ‘are the means by which parents, taxpayers and policymakers can be reassured that schools are doing well and that action is being taken if they are not’.<sup>4</sup>

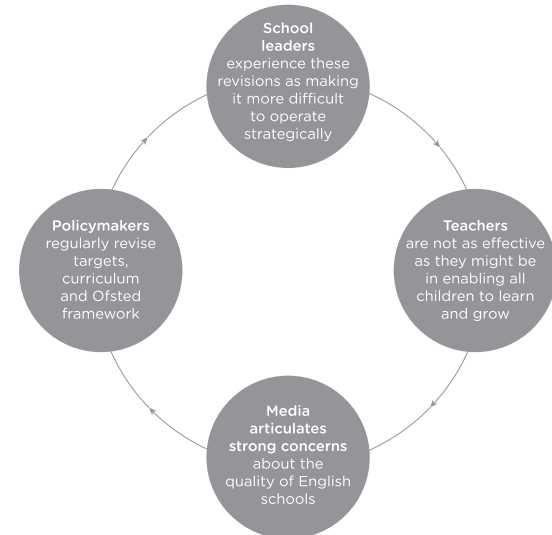
The argument of this paper is that whatever good effects may be attributed to this way of holding schools accountable lie in the past; the assessment and accountability system has become toxic to the life chances of those whose interests it was set up to protect and promote; it is time to replace it with a much better system.

The reason for describing the school accountability system in England as toxic is the way it impacts on four groups of people:

- It requires school leaders to focus their attention on fulfilling the metrics around which accountability is organised, rather than on designing and pursuing strategies that will shape the best possible educational experience for all the young people in their charge. The assumption that these things are always the same as each other is false.<sup>5</sup>
- It puts pressure on teachers and other staff to act – often very deliberately – in ways that are designed to encourage people from outside the school community to make a positive judgement on their performance. This often results in professional compromises as the challenge of stimulating powerful learning in children and young people has to be carried forward with one eye on the inspection process.
- It makes children and young people responsible, through their performance in tests, for the judgements that are made about the effectiveness of the schools they attend. This creates the risk of causing individual students to reach negative conclusions about themselves and their potential.

- The perverse, and often unforeseen, outcomes that the system generates lead to policymakers continuously tinkering with the system in order to try and get it to achieve the intended goals. This further undermines the capacity of school leaders to generate powerful strategies for improving their schools, and traps them in the self-blocking cycle illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1 **How the accountability system in English schools blocks a strategic approach to education**



This report argues that valuing student choice in assessment and introducing a multi-perspective approach to inspection would lead to a system that proceeded through dialogue and reflection rather than judgement and *diktat*. This would de-toxify assessment and accountability by engaging *all* key stakeholders in shaping:

- an agreed set of priorities and goals that are consistent with broad societal expectations regarding the core purposes of education

- a coherent strategy for achieving these educational aims
- a clear, evidence-based account for the wider public of what is strong in their schools that needs to be built on and what is less strong that needs to be addressed if they are to move forward.

Before describing the principles that would underpin this approach, we will say something more about the toxic elements in the current system.

### Tactical rather than strategic

The assessment and accountability system we have now is designed to raise the overall level of performance by school leaders and the people who work with them by making judgements about whether they are working effectively. In the most recent framework for Ofsted inspections,<sup>6</sup> the key standards of concern relate to pupils' achievement, the quality of teaching, pupils' behaviour and safety, and the quality of leadership and management.

While these judgements cover a wide range of issues, the overriding priority often boils down to ensuring that a certain proportion of students gain a particular level in their Standard Assessment Tests (SATs), or a particular set of grades in a particular range of GCSEs.<sup>7</sup> The other areas of investigation come to reflect this priority too: are leaders using data effectively to ensure all pupils achieve, or exceed, their expected levels of progress? Is the quality of teaching consistent across different subjects, and sufficiently differentiated to accommodate various levels of ability and learning styles? And, to be truly 'outstanding', is the school doing enough to spread its purported good practice to other schools in the area that are not doing as well?

These issues naturally come to dominate headteachers' thinking. The consequences of being found wanting are too serious for it to be otherwise. Losing a good or outstanding

category in an Ofsted inspection makes it harder to attract the interest of local parents, and maintain the morale of teachers. Being put into special measures, if you lead a school under local authority control, now means that the Department for Education can require a school to become a sponsored academy, leading to months of turmoil and very likely the loss of your job.

Many argue that this is all to the good. The life chances of children and young people are at stake. If children underperform at Key Stage 2 (shown by tests taken at the age of 10 or 11) they start their secondary schooling at a disadvantage. Failing to achieve particular grades at GCSE closes down opportunities for training, higher education and employment. Surely it is right to insist that those who lead our schools do everything in their power to ensure children and young people secure these good things?

This argument confuses two different propositions. It is right to say that an educational system should enable children and young people to have a good understanding of basic numeracy and literacy by the age of 11, and go on to secure the qualifications that will open the way to good courses and employment pathways. But it does not follow from the vital importance of reading, writing and arithmetic to studying at school, as well as to life and work, that a school system's effectiveness ultimately hinges on all students attaining certain 'levels' on a given set of tests of these and other 'core' subjects at given ages.

By focusing attention on particular sets of externally defined test targets, the assessment and accountability system forces school leaders to keep on answering the wrong question: how can we enable these children to achieve these results, whether or not they represent appropriate goals for this person at this time? Policymakers sometimes argue that it demonstrates moral failure if leaders make decisions under this sort of pressure that they do not consider to be in the best interests of children and young people.<sup>8</sup> This may be a good way for politicians to deny their own responsibility for what happens in schools, but also shows a detachment from reality and an

inability to appreciate the impact of the levers they wield. Education Select Committee chair Graham Stuart remarked to Education Secretary Michael Gove, ‘If you do not understand the power of incentives you will not understand the behaviour in the system that you are responsible for.’<sup>9</sup>

The assessment and accountability system puts pressure on school leaders to run their schools in ways that lead to:

- young people pursuing qualifications that are more helpful to the school’s rankings than they are to the individual’s future
- young people’s intellectual development being forced to fit a prescribed pathway
- young people not being enabled to develop the character skills they need to achieve.

**Young people pursue qualifications that are more helpful to the school’s rankings than they are to the individual’s future**

Professor Alison Wolf’s 2011 report on vocational education analysed the dangers that arise from policymakers taking on themselves the responsibility for ascribing particular value to particular sets of qualifications. She described how schools and colleges responded to the pressure to achieve certain levels in league tables by dissuading students from qualifications that would have value for them as individuals and persuading them instead to take easier qualifications that will contribute to the organisation’s ranking. She particularly highlighted how students were being discouraged from taking English and mathematics, because they were not expected to secure C grades, even though these ‘continue to be the most generally useful and valuable vocational skills on offer’.<sup>10</sup> You might conclude from this that the government should stop holding schools and colleges to account for the numbers of students who achieve good grades on an approved list of qualifications. Simply eliminating particular qualifications from the league tables, which is what the Coalition Government did, only perpetuates the problem created by using a measure of

organisational performance that is linked to the choice of qualifications made by individuals.

Any system that requires politicians to determine what is of value risks creating outcomes that work better for one group of students than for others. Demos research published in 2011 argued that the ‘longstanding culture of prioritising academic skills and excellence’ over ‘practical skills’ was leading to a ‘policy failure that will cement the poor life chances of the next generation and close the lid on prospects of a revival of social mobility in the UK’. The report particularly highlighted how the value put on academic performance tended to create situations where those who had the strongest need to develop character skills – to become ‘more resilient, better at self-direction and possessing higher levels of application’ – were least likely to be given opportunities to do so.<sup>11</sup>

**Young people’s intellectual development is forced to fit a prescribed pathway**

From early on in children’s school careers, their teachers are required to assess what they are *likely* to achieve against particular sets of externally defined targets. They are continuously graded, categorised and ‘levelled’ to calculate where they might end up given where they are at each age. This means that the classroom climate is permeated with messages of greater and lesser worth, leading to the risk that some children will be made to feel incompetent,<sup>12</sup> and the ‘tragedy’ described by the Government’s expert advisers on the new National Curriculum that ‘some pupils become more concerned for what level they are than for the substance of what they know, can do and understand.’ The advisers described the practice of levelling as ‘inhibiting the performance of schools, distorting pupils’ learning and exacerbating social division’.<sup>13</sup>

In secondary schools, the pressures created through this approach can be seen by visiting the staff room of a struggling establishment and viewing the board on which the faces of their Year 11 students are laid out, often colour-coded to distinguish between those who are confidently expected to achieve the benchmark levels, those who might achieve them with an extra



push and those for whom expectations are much lower. You cannot blame teachers or headteachers for this: it is their duty to make the system we have work to the benefit of their students. It is clear, though, that a system designed to focus the attention of teachers and other staff on young people likely to secure particular grade levels is not one designed to ensure every student achieves the best results of which they are capable. The proposal to develop a points system that would take account of all grades achieved by students might soften the focus on the borderline between C and D grades, but it will still incentivise schools to try and boost the number of points it can score (so intensifying the focus on how it can most easily achieve those results).

It is sometimes said that the problem with the current system is that it encourages too much ‘teaching to the test’; this gives government ministers the easy let-out of pointing out the evident benefits to knowledge consolidation that can be secured through revising for exams. The real issue, though, is the negative impact of compelling school leaders to design a young person’s experience of education as a journey towards particular tests they are going to undertake (or not in some cases), and the scores they are predicted to achieve. The extent to which this happens was summed up by the recent report from the examinations regulator Ofqual, which described how the system requires many schools to run Years 10 and 11 as a ‘tactical operation to secure certain grades and combinations of grades’.<sup>14</sup> This focus on achieving prescribed attainment standards in Years 10 and 11 has inevitable and serious impacts on the educational activities of pupils in earlier years of school life.

#### **Young people are not enabled to develop the character skills they need to achieve**

‘What we have to do isn’t always the same as what we need to do,’ says Vic Goddard, the headteacher of Passmores Academy, a school made famous through its participation in the documentary series *Educating Essex*. ‘We want an acceptance that education is about more than five exams. It is the full

journey and everything else that comes with it.’ Goddard is among a group of headteachers<sup>15</sup> who have come together to argue that, among other things, the narrow focus of the system prevents schools working with young people to develop in them the range of skills they need if they are to achieve, at the times when they need them and are ready to develop them. They could only do this if their mission was seen as enabling young people to develop strategies for their lives that turned their enthusiasm and aptitudes into readiness to progress along particular pathways to learning and employment.

Many have argued that facilitating young people to achieve in life necessarily involves fostering a range of different skills. American journalist Paul Tough, for example, argues in his book *How Children Succeed* that success in life comes from character traits such as motivation and persistence, rather than from the cognitive skills most measured in exams.<sup>16</sup> A recent report from the Confederation for British Industry (CBI) described the need for schools to ‘create the ethos and culture that build the social skills also essential to progress in life and work’.<sup>17</sup> The fact that it does not do so is the inevitable result of a system that takes away from schools and individuals the responsibility for making choices and shaping outcomes.

Policymakers sometimes seek to justify the focus on a single metric relating to academic attainment because it acts as a good proxy for all the other things a well-meaning parent or policymaker might want schools to promote: character skills, creative thinking, sporting prowess, and the power to argue, deliberate and work with others. You can indeed argue that schools *should* do this because of the correlations that have been established across different types of schools: between how well children do in music or rugby, for example, and their scores in standardised tests. The problem remains that when schools are put under pressure to achieve a particular set of (moving) targets they can find it hard to hold on to the other things as well. The links are not sufficiently direct for schools to rely on them.

This demonstrates the need to create an accountability system that asks leaders to address a question which

sometimes looks like this: given the people who belong to this community, and the resources available for developing their potential, how can we create a culture that supports all students to become the best they possibly can be?

Such a shift of focus would free up headteachers to stop being tacticians, engaging in what Richard Rumelt describes in *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy* as ‘a lot of look-busy doorknob polishing’, as they work frenziedly to achieve their targets and keep the inspectors off their backs, and to become instead strategists who concentrate all their attention on the things that really matter, working to make the very most of the opportunities available to their schools, and to realise the potential held within and between all the staff and students for whom they are responsible.<sup>18</sup>

### The strain of judgement

While school leaders face a barrage of demands to achieve the school outcomes that currently count – meeting the expected targets, complying with the various codes and procedures, and satisfying the people who will make a judgement on how well they are doing – teachers are put in a position where they have to reconcile their own practice to ideas about ‘teaching quality’ that are much harder to pin down.

Ofsted’s leaders say that there is no such thing as an ‘approved lesson’ – what they are looking for on inspection visits is evidence that teachers are engaging all their students in learning that will stretch them and enable them to achieve more. Ofsted director Michael Wilshaw said in October 2012,

*We should be wary of trying to prescribe a particular style of teaching, whether it be a three part lesson, an insistence that there should be a balance between teacher-led activities and independent learning, or that the lesson should start with aims and objectives, with a plenary at the end and so on and so forth. We should be wary of too much prescription.*<sup>19</sup>

Wilshaw’s openness to the possibility that different teachers will have different styles and approaches – all that matters is the outcomes they achieve – is refreshing. But, seen from a teacher’s perspective, it is also part of the problem: when you are not quite sure what the expectations are, what will look like a ‘good’ lesson to the particular inspector who pushes open your door, you have to be extremely cautious. Whether you align with the ‘traditional’ end of education and its focus on more transmissive styles of teaching, or the ‘progressive’ end with its emphasis on more participative styles of learning, or something in-between, there will always be sufficient anecdotal reports of inspectors operating with an agenda opposed to yours to create some measure of anxiety that you will be found wanting, however ‘good’ you really are. And how can you guarantee that the capacity of your approach to stimulate learning over a year, or longer, will be sufficiently visible over the 20 to 30 minutes of an inspector’s visit? How can you take a risk with an innovative approach to taking your students to a new level in their learning if there is the possibility that its potential failure will be held against you?

An outsider might wonder how any inspector could be confident on the basis of a short visit to a classroom that students were making progress. Do students never appear to go backwards in their understanding, as they grapple with more complex concepts and constructs, before they jump forwards? Do things not sometimes happen in their heads that take time to find expression in words that are spoken or written? Is learning not a process that necessarily happens under the surface? The same outsider might also ask how, under the current arrangements, teachers could avoid feeling the need to put on a show as they seek to demonstrate that learning is taking place. They have been criticised for this by Wilshaw.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps it is hard for a highly experienced teacher and headteacher to see how Ofsted’s role, with all the mythic power that has become attached to it over the years, affects the self-confidence of those who almost certainly lack his level of self-confidence.

There is evidence to support the argument that the anxiety which the prospect of an Ofsted inspection generates in the minds of teachers – particularly those who are working with students who are resistant to learn – can constrain the capacity of some teachers to be creative, responsive and spontaneous. A survey of 334 primary schools commissioned by the last Labour government found that the pressure of the standards agenda resulted in teachers imposing a narrow learning agenda and ‘apparently forgetting the need to promote student involvement, interest and engagement as participant learners’. They seemed to prefer the ‘safety’ offered by formulaic lesson plans which left little room for deviation to address the interests and enthusiasms of their students. They also considered it more important to ‘cover’ the curriculum than to provide opportunities for deep learning that takes root in the mind of the learner.<sup>21</sup>

More recently, a report written by Becky Francis for the Royal Society of Arts concluded from an examination of inspection reports for schools judged ‘satisfactory’ by Ofsted that there was a tendency for teachers in those schools to lecture pupils and dominate the classroom with top-down approaches. She suggested, that these approaches ‘reflect teacher anxiety about the need to ensure and drill content coverage, and/or a distrust of the ability of their students to work independently or in groups’.<sup>22</sup> The paradox is that behaviour designed to repel a ‘satisfactory’ judgement became the cause of it being imposed.

There are some schools whose teachers will not recognise this description. With some exceptions, they will be schools that work with well-motivated students, and as a result find it relatively easy to deliver high levels of academic achievement; their test results are likely to ensure that Ofsted is well disposed to them in the first place. But in schools where students’ motivation to learn needs to be carefully fostered through practices that are responsive to individual learning needs, the current system is more likely to distort professional judgement. These are the schools where we most need to see teachers being encouraged and supported rather than constrained and limited.

What people want from teachers in relation to the classes they teach is little different from what they want from headteachers in relation to the schools they lead: for them to draw on their training, experience and judgement to assess the learning needs of, and learning opportunities for, their students; to be resourceful in delivering an engaging educational experience; to work collaboratively with other professionals to test the quality of what they do now; and to expand their awareness of what is possible. Many teachers have undoubtedly been helped to achieve this through their exchanges with inspectors who were reflective, broad-minded and careful in the judgements that they made. And many too have benefited from working with inspectors to produce reports covering wider educational issues that are an important and valuable part of Ofsted’s work. But it does not take many to have an experience which is different from that to cause some teachers to feel they must try to second-guess what the inspector is going to think of their way of teaching.

### **Burdening children**

Media commentators often treat it as self-evident that a school which achieves high test scores is a ‘good’ or even ‘outstanding’ school, whereas a school that achieves lesser results is an ‘inadequate’ or ‘failing’ school. In reality a key determinant of how a school does is the quality of support given to students by their families and communities; you cannot deduce very much about the quality of leadership or teaching from raw performance data.

Schools can do a lot to address the challenges facing children who come from areas of social and economic disadvantage. Some schools in these areas achieve exceptional results against the apparent odds. It is obviously important that lessons are learned from their success, and that other schools are given every possible encouragement to emulate them. It is quite another thing to label a school as inadequate, or to devalue the calibre of those who work there, only because their results do not match those of schools in more privileged areas. This point

was vividly made by Martin Stephen when he was headmaster of the high-performing St Paul's School in London:

*League tables are increasingly not about education but about electioneering. They are designed to make the system look good. Instead of throwing a lifebelt out to struggling schools they hold them underwater. It injects fear into the system and destroys innovation.*<sup>23</sup>

Ofsted's judgements inevitably create waves – in the local and national media, in the gossip that swirls around any group of parents as they cluster around the school gate, in the anxious conversations that take place among parents, grandparents and others. Little has been written about the impact on children and young people of finding their school being judged negatively in the league tables, or being at the darker end of Ofsted judgements. But when my ten-year-old daughter experienced her much loved school being put into special measures, it dealt a blow to her self-confidence. Shocked at the impact this had on a place where she spent a large proportion of her life, learned many skills, and had grown to love many teachers and acquired many friends, she described the judgement on her school as a 'disaster'.

At Antidote, the charity I ran from 1997 to 2012, we worked in several schools where students spoke of trying to hide from others details of where they went to learn and to grow as they went about in their town or city. A recent report by teachers who have worked in educationally challenged areas as part of the Teach First programme<sup>24</sup> confirms that the stereotyping of schools as a result of Ofsted judgements can cause children and young people who attend them to internalise feelings of inadequacy, which it is hard to overcome:

*The impact on pupils in schools perceived to be less than 'good' cannot be underestimated. It is possible that if young people do not trust in their school to help them to achieve, they will see little value in putting in effort in their lessons. This can manifest in disaffection or disengagement with school and ultimately can*

*perpetuate a cycle of underachievement, creating new obstacles in the improvement process.*<sup>25</sup>

The recent decision to re-designate schools previously judged 'satisfactory' as 'requires improvement' shows how difficult it can be for policymakers to appreciate the implicit messages they communicate through the language that they deploy. We should all be working to shape an education system where steady, ongoing, continuous improvement is the goal of every school. But it takes a detached bureaucratic mind not to see that turning a soft positive judgement ('satisfactory') into a fairly hard negative one ('requires improvement') is just as likely to demoralise as it is to galvanise. As headteachers' leader Brian Lightman has put it: 'Would you want your child to go to a school if it is labelled "not good"?' Observing that many schools missed a 'good' grade by a whisker, he went on: 'If you're not careful... you could push that school into a spiral of decline.'<sup>26</sup>

This lack of awareness is especially dangerous given that the system makes children and young people responsible, through their performance in tests, for the judgements that are made about their schools. Notwithstanding the intrinsic value to the young person of getting good levels in their SATs or grades in their GCSEs, the possibility of children concluding that their teacher's zeal for achieving these goals actually derives from organisational self-interest – they are designed to secure a better rating for the school – is an unnecessary complication to the sometimes complex relationships between students and their teachers.

This element in the system increases the likelihood that students will see the results they achieve in tests, compared with those of others, as an absolute judgement on their capacity rather than an indicator of what they have achieved so far in that particular area of learning. This can be damaging to those young people who start out 'behind', either because they did not receive support for their learning outside school, or simply because they were born in the summer.<sup>27</sup> There is a danger these students will conclude that certain goals are out

of their reach; they do not have the capacity to learn, develop, change and grow; and they cannot achieve however hard they try.<sup>28</sup> The American psychologist Carol Dweck has written about the importance of ensuring tests are conducted in such a way as to build children's confidence in themselves as 'can-do' learners who are willing to try and fail and try again.<sup>29</sup> The assessment and accountability system does not seem to have been designed with this in mind.

### Political tinkering

Politicians find it hard to take seriously the argument that our current assessment and accountability system needs fundamental redesign. 'It is absolutely the right thing to do,' declared Alan Johnson as Secretary of State for Education and Skills in 2006. 'The whole kit and caboodle – Ofsted, league tables, the concentration on tests and exams. If anything, we need to intensify rather than relax.'<sup>30</sup>

The reasons the accountability system is attractive to policymakers is because it provides them with the justification they need for taking decisive action, whether this is the naming and shaming processes favoured by New Labour politicians, or the enforced conversion to academy status promoted by the Coalition Government. Politicians like to have levers they can pull on to get things changed and, they hope, objectives delivered. They may for a time talk about the value of devolving power, but eventually the fear that they will be held responsible for something they have no control over causes them to claw it back.<sup>31</sup> Speaking before the election in 2010, former education secretary David Blunkett was perceptive when he expressed scepticism about the declared commitment of Conservative politicians to 'letting go': 'I know we'll move back again once people have discovered... that you do need levers to pull if you want to change what's happening in the classroom.'<sup>32</sup>

When problems come to light, the usual response is to try and remedy them *without* reviewing the fundamental tenets by which the system operates. This can lead to an incoherent

sequence of dramatic changes in the messages from government about what schools ought to be doing. If league tables disadvantage young people who are not interested in core GCSEs, then let vocational qualifications be regarded as 'equivalent' to academic ones. If schools are pushing kids to take easy 'vocational' qualifications rather than developing key skills, then let us get rid of equivalents. If education is becoming too narrowly focused, then let us widen the range of things that Ofsted inspects. If schools are being distracted by their need to focus on things other than their supposed core task, then let them focus back on the really important things, and increase the rigour of the examination system at the same time.

Enquiries are regularly set up to consider the failings of the current system; they always conclude that it needs to stay in place. Lord Bew's report on the tests given to children in Year 6 can stand for several others. He noted that the system tended to encourage 'over-rehearsal and teaching to the test', that the league tables which published the results of these tests were a 'crude way of ranking schools'. This was both 'unfair and unhelpful to anyone seeking an accurate comparison of different schools', leading to a level of concern about the existing system, which showed that change really was needed. But instead of arguing for a new approach to accountability, he fell back on 'international evidence' that 'external school-level accountability is important in driving up attainment and pupils' progress', and proposed some sensible modifications to the system which have subsequently been implemented.<sup>33</sup> A reasonable criticism of Lord Bew's argument is that 'international evidence' could *never* demonstrate the value of the particular system being used in the UK.

The turbulence created by the attempts of policymakers to fix the system are magnified by the understandable hyper-responsiveness of schools to any indication about how they are going to be judged. Referring to the effects of the E-Bacc measure, introduced in 2011 to recognise GCSE achievement in specific sets of subjects (mathematics, English, a language, humanities and science), the outgoing Director General for School Standards at the Department for Education, Jon Coles,

told the Education Select Committee that the government had never anticipated schools would change their curriculum in response to 'an extra column of figures in the performance tables'. It was quite wrong, he said, 'for schools to be moving children off courses they had already started on to E-Bacc programmes'.<sup>34</sup> Other statements by ministers suggested that they were, in fact, pleasantly surprised to find out how powerful the levers were on which they could now pull.<sup>35</sup>

Under the Coalition Government, altering elements of the assessment and accountability system has become the main lever available to government ministers seeking to influence the shape of the school system. The overt objective of the Coalition Government's education policy is to free up schools so that they can determine for themselves their approach to teaching and learning. In reality, policymakers repeatedly fall for the temptation to steer the direction of travel by deploying their powers to set targets and determine the measures to be taken against those who fail to deliver on them.

As successive education secretaries seek to impose on the system their idiosyncratic idea of what it means to be an educated person, they produce a zig-zag effect with first one priority and then another rising to the top. Such a course does not create an environment in which leaders can make the sort of long-term strategic decisions that enrich the learning experience of everyone who studies in schools. The pace of change means that none of the things they do has the time it needs to become embedded. A report from the British Educational Research Association (BERA) argues that most school improvement research 'suggests that at least three to five years are needed for an intervention to lead to measurable changes in attainment'.<sup>36</sup>

What tends to be forgotten in arguments about accountability is that schools are sensitive, multi-layered organisational systems seeking to engage in the subtle and sophisticated process of developing individual learners. Trying to bring off this challenging task is made immensely more difficult if the goalposts are regularly moved, with shifts in simplistic targets that can then trigger the imposition of profoundly disruptive change processes. As the former

headteachers' leader John Dunford has remarked, 'There is a simple answer to every question and it is usually wrong, because there always are complex issues, particularly in a place such as a school. So you need something that has a degree of complexity about it.'<sup>37</sup>

Some 'failed' schools benefited from the fresh start provided by the sponsored Academies Programme. The rest need time and support to develop good strategy and build the systems that will enable steady improvement. This requires an end to what the pressure group Compass has described as a 'chaotic and recriminatory reform process that tires teachers, puzzles parents and employers and creates a permanent sense of discontent'.<sup>38</sup> Schools need to be helped to grow organically, to build on their strengths and to cut away at their weaknesses. The urgent need to ensure that all children have a good education does not mean it is a good idea to keep on throwing everything in the air, creating a sense of confusion, muddle and uncertainty. It would be enormously helpful to have an assessment and accountability system that did not hold out to politicians the temptation to do more tinkering, but encouraged them instead to support school leaders in becoming increasingly strategic in how they promoted the development of the learners in their care.



## 4 Toxicity's source

The assessment and accountability system is toxic because it gives one voice the power to dominate over the others, terminating the discussion, leaving people feeling bruised because they have not been engaged. It does this because it was designed in response to a breakdown in trust between education professionals, policymakers and the wider public. The system was failing, people said, and it was the fault of the professionals. Therefore, it was necessary to set the judgements of inspectors against those of students, staff and other school stakeholders, and to make their judgements the grounds for executive action against schools.

The core belief of this system is that school leaders, and the teams of people who work with them, cannot be trusted to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their organisations, or to develop strategies for making their schools even better. This can only be done under the supervision of outsiders. Nor can they be relied on to support their students to make good choices in the subjects they study and the qualifications they acquire. Therefore it is necessary for judgements about school quality to be made unilaterally by an external team of inspectors, for these judgements to be heavily influenced by how well students perform on particular tests in a particular set of 'core' subjects, and for the choices made by students to be circumscribed by a government perspective on what they 'need'.

Maintaining the existing system has come to depend on the perpetuation of this distrust, achieved by propagating the argument that there are educational theories floating around which, despite emerging from research, being attractive to some parents and being found to be effective by some teachers, are profoundly misguided and dangerous. There is a fifth column working in education to impose these dangerous ideas

on your children. Only the vigilance of Ofsted and the government will keep them at bay.

This will seem like an exaggerated description of the viewpoint, until you read what politicians say or write when in the presence of a friendly audience. In 1999, for example, when Michael Portillo was an MP, he declared:

*Academic thinking about education downplays the importance of knowledge. It promotes the importance of the child's learning through experimentation and experience. The gobbledygook of academia can be dangerous. What if these theories don't work and children simply don't learn what they need to? Children aren't adults. They can't know what they don't know. They don't yet have the capacity to choose their own way. Our duty is to raise them from ignorance.*<sup>39</sup>

Education professionals have worked hard since then to show that Portillo's argument is based on a false opposition, that the important thing in working with children and young people is simultaneously to develop skills and knowledge; that the process of learning facts cannot be separated from the process of working out how to deploy them. But all too little avail, it seems. 'When I did my O-levels and A-levels, the O-level was when you really did absorb huge amounts of knowledge; the A-level was when you transformed from being a knowledge absorber into a thinker,' Nick Gibb MP declared as schools minister, by way of explaining the essence of the new National Curriculum that he had been responsible for devising.<sup>40</sup> He had previously declared that 'the mind is developing by learning and understanding more and more concepts, by remembering more and more pieces of information'.<sup>41</sup>

The difficulties posed by these sorts of statements lie in the way they assume there is only one way to learn, and that one person's personal experience of learning is sufficient ground not only for making this assumption but also for seeking to ensure *all* students learn in this way. Even if you know nothing about the psychology of learning, a few conversations with friends and colleagues about how they

learn new things will probably cause you to conclude that such a crude model is unlikely to work. This is because it makes no allowance for the possibility that different people may learn in very different ways. And even if this were to be true for only 90 per cent of students, that would still make it a very unsatisfactory way of managing the behaviour of teachers who have to make rapid judgements every time they stand in front of their pupils on how they can help and support students who are in the other 10 per cent.

However, some policymakers hold this viewpoint so powerfully that they feel impelled to speak disparagingly of any teachers, parents and academics who think differently. In a report published by the think-tank Policy Exchange, a former policy adviser to the Prime Minister described as 'the blob' those who might challenge the decision to change the governance of a particular school.<sup>42</sup> A few months later, a piece appeared in the *Daily Mail* credited to the Secretary of State for Education himself, which used the same term, 'the blob', to refer to a 'network of educational gurus in and around our universities who praised each other's research, sat on committees that drafted politically correct curricula, drew gifted young teachers away from their vocation and instead directed them towards ideologically driven theory'.<sup>43</sup>

Whatever your view on the argument itself, this attempt to sweep aside the arguments of those who challenge you – without making space for dialogue, reflection, debate – is unhelpful in a policy adviser and unbecoming in a secretary of state with responsibility for education. Teachers will tell you that the capacity to think is most commonly developed by weighing the value of every argument and engaging with it – analysing where it is somewhat partial or slightly incoherent, drawing on what is good and insightful to strengthen your own case. It is inherently unlikely that there is *nothing* of value in another's argument, something from which you can learn, and use to help you steer a better course.

Fuelled by certain elements of the media, this narrative of distrust licenses government ministers to ignore elements of the professional, parental and academic voice, saying such



voices do not matter. As that voice becomes more shrill in response to its exclusion, the consequence is a sterile ding-dong, which encourages government ministers to feel that they are licensed to pursue a course that, being un-informed by elements of the professional voice, is unlikely to command the level of assent needed to ensure its success.

## 5 Building trust

Commentators say that one reason why the Finnish education system performs well on international tests in comparison with most other countries, including England, is the level of trust that permeates relationships between teachers, parents and policymakers. Pasi Sahlberg, the system's roving ambassador, has written that the Finns emphasise the importance of 'collaboration, equity and trust-based responsibility' in contrast to the English emphasis on stronger accountability, standardised testing and school choice. 'Educational accountability in the Finnish education context', he observes, 'preserves and enhances trust among teachers, students, school leaders and education authorities.'<sup>44</sup> According to Sahlberg, a recent survey found that half of Finland's teachers would consider changing jobs if they had to submit to the *diktats* of a centrally mandated inspection system such as English teachers endure.<sup>45</sup>

We do not, though, have to look to Finland for indications of the importance of building trust into the fabric of our education system. Ofsted elicited general principles from a close examination of 12 secondary schools delivering higher levels of achievement than might be anticipated from the socio-economic status of the communities they served, finding that such schools were characterised by:

- an appreciative no-blame culture that encouraged initiative, innovation and experimentation
- staff being able to be open and honest with each other in a working environment that values good communication and collegiate professionalism

- strong relationships, which ensured students knew their teachers really did care about them
- a capacity to listen closely to what students said, and to use this feedback in improving their learning
- a steady flow of improvements coming from staff having time to work in teams and engage in reflective discussions that are rooted in high-quality data.<sup>46</sup>

The fundamental problem with the assessment and accountability system we have now is that it is, in part at least, a management and control system. It assumes a lack of trust and does nothing to build it. Rather than holding people to account for what they deliver, the effect of the system is that it drives some people to do things in a certain way. Instead of working to generate the best academic achievement possible, the system aims to produce a defined level of academic achievement.

Proponents of the existing system assume that the problems of the education system arise from a lack of ‘aspiration’. Blinded by their false beliefs, the argument goes, particular groups of teachers and their leaders have insufficient aspiration for the young people in their charge. The Government is on a crusade to cajole teachers in thrall to these beliefs to aspire more. Those who cannot be converted will be driven out. ‘I believe we need radical improvement in the education system in this country,’ the current director of Ofsted has been quoted as saying. ‘My view is that we have tolerated mediocrity for far too long – it has settled into the system.’<sup>47</sup> Every sermon from the Ofsted pulpit (at least in the versions that reach the press) reiterates this message, with its accompanying promise to ‘raise the bar’ and deliver improvement.

But what are the problems that this rhetoric is designed to address? At first glance, they seem quite diverse:

- Business organisations say that schools and colleges are not turning out people with the range of skills and qualities they will need in the workplace.<sup>48</sup>
- There are too many 16–24-year-olds not in employment, education or training (NEET), and too many of them apparently lack the basic skills they need to gain an initial foothold in the labour market.<sup>49</sup>
- The gap between the achievement of children from disadvantaged households and those from prosperous ones is larger in the UK than elsewhere.<sup>50</sup>
- Our average scores in *some* international tests suggest that we are losing ground against other nations in developing numeracy and literacy skills.<sup>51</sup>

In reality, these are all versions of the same problem. The education system in England is reasonably good at promoting the achievement of around half its students, and rather poor at promoting the achievement of the rest,<sup>52</sup> a significant proportion of whom come from socially and economically disadvantaged homes. These young people drag down the averages in international tests. Some of them fail to enter the job market, and many of those who do irritate their employers by their deficits in soft skills. How can it be argued that the assessment and accountability system which has been in existence for 20 years will solve this problem? The evidence presented in this report so far would suggest, instead, that the failings of the school system might be the *consequence* of the accountability and assessment system we have. Nothing can be achieved by continuing to tinker with it. If we want to address the problem, only a radical overhaul will do.

The current system fails because it does not recognise that need for schools to build trust, open up communication and build their internal capacity to become steadily more intelligent about themselves. The process of waiting for

outsiders to come and make judgements about their quality risks subverting and sabotaging the development of the school's own systems for finding answers to important questions such as: what will enable this group of young people to become fully engaged in their learning? Why do these children not respond well to a teacher who stimulates others? Why is this group of teachers more motivated than this other group? Having built that understanding, they would be able to develop strategies that deliver results. The problem is not low aspiration, but insufficient sophistication in identifying and shifting blocks to achievement.

By trying to cajole people to act in particular ways, the existing system continuously risks provoking their anger and defensiveness, closing down their capacity to reflect on what else needs to change if they are to become better at what they do. Demos associate Jake Chapman has argued that an approach that acknowledged the complexity of the system would seek to:

- base interventions on learning about what is going to improve overall system performance
- focus on processes of improvement, rather than on systems of control and target-setting
- engage with people through listening and co-researching, rather than telling and instructing
- distribute responsibility for innovation and improvement throughout the organisation.<sup>53</sup>

The argument in the rest of this paper is that this sort of thinking should permeate accountability and assessment in schools.

## 6 Standards without standardisation

We argued above that policymakers damage young people's education by assessing the performance of their schools according to how well students perform in tests of their numeracy and literacy at Year 6, and the number of A\*-C grades achieved in a particular set of subjects in Year 11.

In a complex world where society and the economy need access to diverse skills and varied forms of creativity it makes little sense to measure schools on their capacity to get all students up to a particular level in a particular set of 'core' subjects', measured by a particular set of qualifications (or their 'equivalences'). This treats the pursuit of simplistic metrics by which to compare schools as being of more importance than giving children and young people the opportunity to have a rich experience of education that sets them on the pathway to a successful life.

The economy, society and the workplace are undergoing rapid change as they absorb the impact of changing technologies. Future-gazers argue that interpersonal competence will become as 'basic' as reading and writing, that we will need entrepreneurial and creative scientists who can find solutions to the problems created by the pressure on natural resources, and others who can create new products to sell into a broadening global marketplace. There will be a demand for people who have the imagination and charisma needed to mesh communities together, and ensure that institutions at every level function well to address the needs of individuals and groups of individuals. The people most likely to thrive will be those who can build flexible packages of skills around areas of intense specialism, and who are able to keep on learning in collaboration with others; the big prizes will go to mavericks with high levels of creativity and resourcefulness.

To prepare young people for this world, we need an assessment system that holds schools to account for showing they have developed rounded individuals with the range of skills and qualities they need to achieve valuable goals. How is this to be done?

It is beyond the scope of this report to propose a new assessment system: we need a national discussion that will elaborate a very different way of doing things. Our argument is that the assessment and accountability system should not be shaping the ways in which individual students steer their course through the National Curriculum and beyond into GCSEs. And that the aim of the system should be enabling them to pursue what they are most interested in, to learn in ways that work for them, and to follow their proclivities to develop particular sets of skills, building on a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy. People become good at things – whether doing long division, writing elegant sentences, playing the violin or competing in basketball – because they practise them, persistently, repeatedly and purposefully.<sup>54</sup> In order to practise something, they have to see the point, to believe they have the capacity to grow and develop, to have felt the experience of being absorbed in an activity, to be confident that practising this particular thing is worth their while, to gain some pleasure out of the small steps they make towards a higher goal. This is more likely to happen when children and young people are able to make well-informed choices about where they apply their learning energy.

The Centre for Market Reform in Education (CMRE) has called on policymakers to stop defining what qualifications young people in the 14–19 age group need to acquire:

*The use of performance tables as accountability mechanisms is manifestly unhelpful to schools' efforts to make decisions about what subjects and qualifications they should offer that are in the best interests of learners... [Schools] should be free to determine what should go into their general educational offering, and to set the parameters on the range of additional subjects and qualifications they want to offer. Parents and young people should have scope to*

*explore and then choose subjects in addition to their schools' core curriculum offering which allow them to demonstrate their particular strengths and aptitudes.*<sup>55</sup>

Whatever you think of the CMRE's arguments for increasing school choice,<sup>56</sup> there is a strong case for looking at ways of increasing qualification choice. While schools might still be held to account for the scores their students achieved in tests at Year 6, and the qualifications they acquire in Year 11, it would be for schools, their students and their parents or carers to decide – after careful deliberation and with due care – what those tests and qualifications should be. This would help to address the problem that currently the broad aspirations of the curriculum are sabotaged by the narrow focus of the testing regime. A central argument of Cambridge Primary Review was that national 'standards' should be about all aspects of the curriculum, not just limited aspects of three subjects.<sup>57</sup> Allowing test and qualification choice would achieve this by enabling groups of students to provide a window into particular aspects of the curriculum as delivered in that school. Everything would be tested, but each individual would only be tested on a small part of the whole, a part they will have chosen.

One possible way in which this might work is as follows:

- Policymakers would continue to decide the breadth and scope of what is taught in schools to children up to the age of 14 (or even beyond) by coordinating the design of the National Curriculum.
- Qualification providers would be freed up to design different ways of testing knowledge in National Curriculum subjects, with the leeway to offer learners a range of avenues through which to display their knowledge and skills.
- Each of these tests would have within them a section that assessed the levels of student ability to use numbers, comprehend what they are reading and deploy language, so that schools' effectiveness at ensuring children have these

fundamental skills continues to be transparent at the same time as it ceases to be the central focus of attention.

- The role of Ofqual would change from ensuring all qualifications measure the same thing in the same way, to specifying how these qualifications are different from each other. It would also be responsible for ensuring that there was some measure of comparability in the scales used by the different providers to assess the level of knowledge and skill displayed by students in the various tests they offer.
- Parents, teachers and children would be free to decide which areas of the National Curriculum individual students were to be tested on at the end of Key Stage 2 (when they are 10–11), and which tests are going to be used for this purpose. This would enable children to follow their particular interests, while enjoying a broad curriculum and displaying their knowledge in ways that reflect their preferred ways of learning.
- At Key Stage 4 (when they are 15–16) students would be free to build the qualification portfolios they consider will most powerfully display their talents to further and higher education institutions, or potential employers, without having to worry about whether they are making choices that will contribute to their school's rankings in league tables.<sup>58</sup>

By making comparisons between schools so much more difficult, such an approach would make more apparent the inherent limitations of using the performance of children in tests to measure the quality of the teaching and leadership in a school. This would not stop ingenious journalists from designing league tables, but the diversity of the offerings would make it more difficult to rank qualifications simply as 'easier' or 'more difficult', and the complexity of the sorting task would make it much more likely that the tables they came up with would have some degree of shading and nuance. This would put on the published results the sort of 'health warning' about their technical limitations which the British Academy

has argued for in its excellent work on the failings of the current performance monitoring systems.<sup>59</sup>

And how, people might ask, would educational institutions and companies find the students they are looking for in such a boundary-less system? How too would young people know what to aim for if there was so much uncertainty about the levels they needed to achieve and the subjects they needed to study in order to get them to where they want to go?

Here the solution could come from providing high-quality information in ways that enable good choices to be made. There might be a central databank that brought together up-to-date information from Ofqual (or a renamed qualifications agency) on the specific knowledge and skills measured by different qualifications, alongside the opportunities they open up for people in further and higher education, as well as the workplace. This would enable colleges and employers to peruse the qualities being measured by particular qualifications as they select future employees, and students to see what qualification combinations led to particular courses or employment offers. There would need to be good systems for sorting, channelling and bundling this information so that it can stimulate meaningful reflection and learning.

The usefulness of such a databank could be reinforced over time by including information on the progress of each student through education and into the world of work, gathered perhaps through the National Insurance system for a decade or more after they have left school. Properly presented, these data would provide a much deeper insight into the long-term effectiveness of the education system than the publication of figures relating to abstract indicators whose direct relevance to people's life chances is hard to glean.

Equipped with such a vast mine of easily accessible information, young people would be able to negotiate their pathways towards particular real-life goals, engaging from early on in a conversation involving parents, teachers, coaches and mentors about what they need to learn and why they need to learn it. Such a dialogue would be more likely to lead to a good match between the expectations of colleges, universities

and employers and what young people have to offer than the current system. More importantly, perhaps, it would require schools and parents to engage in rich conversations with children and young people about who they are and what they want to become, rather than driving them towards particular sets of performance indicators (entry to Russell Group universities, for example) on the possibly spurious grounds that these will guarantee them the sort of opportunities they are looking for.

A possible objection to such a proposal is that it would risk consolidating low aspirations for children and young people in deprived communities, denying many the emancipatory benefits claimed for the five A\*–C grade target. But the assumption that the root of some children's underachievement is the low aspirations their parents have for them has been challenged by research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The authors of a report published by the Foundation warn that 'generalisations about the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour that surround aspirations in deprived communities are not helpful and should be avoided'. The interviews the authors carried out with secondary school students in London, Nottingham and Glasgow produced no evidence to support the widely held belief that there was a problem of low aspirations among young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds. The real problem, they suggested, was that parents and young people often had little understanding of what it would take to fulfill particular ambitions.<sup>60</sup>

The Rowntree findings imply that any incentive to developing a deeper and better-informed conversation between parents, teachers and students about what aspirations young people have and how these might be realised would seem to be more useful than maintaining a system that simply assumes a particular set of qualifications will open up new possibilities for young people from disadvantaged communities.

By helping to boost the quality of the conversations between teachers, students and parents, the proposal for multi-perspective inspection that follows would help to ensure

young people received good guidance on the choices they made. The reports produced would need to describe how the qualifications taken were chosen, and to what extent the targets set internally were achieved.



## 7 Releasing a school's intelligence about itself

A central assumption of the accountability system we have now is that only an external inspection, albeit one informed by the school's own self-evaluation, can reveal a school's faults and virtues, or identify the best way for it to improve. Without the opportunity to be judged by others, the argument goes, no school would ever face up to its limitations and find a way to correct them.

The difficulty with this argument is that a system which places such a high value on the kitemark represented by a 'good' or 'outstanding' Ofsted judgement, and threatens upheaval on those schools that receive a less positive rating, is not one that actively encourages honesty and openness.

If honesty is central to a trust-rich school system, the emphasis should be on creating incentives to openness. This is not the case at the moment, according to a headteacher of a school considered 'good' by Ofsted, who spoke at a gathering of headteachers organised by Antidote:

*We have managed to hang on to the things we consider important. Sometimes we have had to hide them because Ofsted is on the way. We have become good at managing the system. It would be lovely, though, to be able to be a bit more open about the subversive things we have been doing, to be able to say: this is what it is really about, the wider elements of education.<sup>61</sup>*

Headteachers often feel that Ofsted misses what is good or interesting about their school. Describing the judgement of inspectors that his was a 'good' school, the head of King Edward's School in Bury St Edmunds said:

*We half agreed, but thought they missed out on some essential features of our work. We're not sure they'd spotted some of the fundamental changes to ethos that had been put in place, the change to a distinctive three-session days of 100-minute lessons, and the emphasis on active learning.*<sup>62</sup>

Situations can also arise like that which confronted the deputy head of a south London school Antidote was working with. When the inspectors said they wanted to give the school an 'outstanding' rating for behaviour, the deputy was delighted that they thought so well of the systems they were putting in place to tackle this issue. His personal hunch, however, was that behaviour was getting worse. He even thought this might be the result of those systems which were currently judged as being outstanding. What was he to do? Argue against the judgement and be seen to pull his school's reputation down? Or say nothing and risk the school not being able to tap the resources it would need to tackle a deteriorating situation?

Ofsted's leaders rightly argue that they want schools to be open with them. Inspectors are there to make judgements about effectiveness, not to prescribe what schools should or should not be doing. But as long as there is a possibility of being judged negatively, people will be careful about what they reveal.

Collectively, those who work in a school, learn in a school or interact regularly with people from both groups as parents or carers will necessarily know much more about its strengths and weaknesses than can be gleaned by the representatives of an external agency. In a system that encouraged trust and openness – so that everything could be said – schools could draw out this knowledge to generate intelligence about what is happening that needs to be addressed, and where opportunities for improvement currently lie hidden. Doing this would enable them to deal with issues before they became problems, and to be continuously generating creative ways of moving forward. As historian Jon Wilson argues in the Fabian Society publication *Letting Go*, 'If you get people in a room together, if people have the freedom to meet, talk and argue, they'll make better decisions about the things that affect their lives than anybody else.'<sup>63</sup>

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) has long argued that external inspection of schools should be replaced by self-evaluation. In 1995, the NUT published *Schools Speak for Themselves* about a project that involved gathering views from parents, students and teachers, then engaging them in a 'wider critical debate' on what the school was seeking to do. The authors noted that valuable insights emerged when young people were given the chance to 'evaluate what is going on in the classroom' and when 'different voices' were given weight in the school's reflections on itself. They described how involvement in this sort of process led to everyone feeling more accountable and becoming more responsible. They wrote too about how the momentum of the process led to people who started off with very different perspectives finding a sense of common purpose: they *wanted* to work collaboratively to make their school as good as it could be. On the basis of these findings, the authors called for Ofsted's 'dipstick approach' to be replaced with a 'collaborative' and 'negotiated' process that would stay close to the 'acoustic' of the school.<sup>64</sup>

The NUT's campaign led to 'self-evaluation' being incorporated into the Ofsted framework in 2005, as part of Education Secretary Estelle Morris' strategy for fostering professional dialogue. What did not happen, though, was any fundamental change in the *role* of the agency. As a result, the school's leadership team was required to spend a lot of energy collecting data, but the ultimate responsibility for defining what was important and making a judgement on the school's effectiveness remained with Ofsted. This was clearly not the sort of self-evaluation that the NUT had in mind.

Members of the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee described the process that evolved from this as being too often a 'disruptive tick-box event'. What it *should* be, they said, is 'a liberating and constructive process of gathering information about life and learning in school' that uses 'alternative forms of evidence' and 'speaks to the true culture and ethos of their school'.<sup>65</sup> They particularly highlighted the value of this approach for enabling a school to 'consolidate success and secure improvement' across 'the full

range of a school's influence over the wellbeing of the children who learn there and the community outside'. The report's authors did not recognise how unlikely this was to happen for as long as judgemental power remained with external inspectors, working to a brief from central government.

The NUT's argument for school self-evaluation has no chance of making headway in a culture where distrust of the teaching profession is regularly stoked by the media. For some, things have not moved on much since the day when a junior education minister railed against self-evaluation at a fringe meeting of the Conservative Party Conference in 1996, arguing that 'rotten schools and rotten teachers' need the 'tough hand' of an inspectorate to sort them out.<sup>66</sup> The idea that a school's insiders might be in a position to provide a deeper, truer and more useful account than outsiders of a school's strengths and weaknesses, leading to an even better strategy for its improvement, does not have the power to prevail against that point of view.

The problem with 'self-evaluation' is that it looks too much like the profession's attempt to take on itself the power to decide what happens in our schools, rather than a way of sharing power with *all* stakeholders, including parents and members of the wider community. The presentation in this form does not promise sufficient protection against the potential for senior managers to sabotage or subvert a process. There is a tendency in every organisation for particular groups of people to become defensive, and to refuse to acknowledge fears and weaknesses so that they can be addressed. If judgemental power is to be removed from inspectors, there has to be real bite to the process, a guarantee that everyone will be completely honest in the account they give of their experience. People need to be confident that all viewpoints will be heard, considered and reflected on. Sufficient space has to be created for these different perspectives to be integrated into an agreed account of what is happening, and an agreed strategy for taking things forward. And if there are tough messages to be given to leadership, those messages have to be communicated and responded to.

The approach we advocate – multi-perspective inspection – is designed to achieve these objectives by:

- collecting data annually from staff, students and parents about how their experience of the school impacts on the quality of teaching and learning (looking at the roots)
- using these data to inform in-depth conversations involving all the school's stakeholders about what the data mean, and what they demonstrate about how the school can improve teaching and learning (a new sort of conversation)
- publishing reports that provide an honest account of what is strong and what is less strong in the school, together with its strategy for making things even better.

There are two key roles for external agencies to play in this process. The first – ensuring that the process is properly conducted, that it is truly multi-perspectival, that every voice has been heard – would need new agencies accredited to work with schools. Some might be concerned that these agencies would end up in the pocket of schools, or that they would become a new avenue through which government would exercise its power. Clearly, it would be impossible for both anxieties to be realised. This captures what is important about the role of external agencies, which is fundamentally about being even-handed. If any agency was seen to be siding with one part in the collective conversation, that party would be justified in raising the issue, and their concerns would need to be addressed.

We describe below how a remodelled Ofsted would be well equipped to fulfill a second role: checking the reports to ensure the strategy put forward at the end of the process is adequate to the data collected at the beginning; engaging the school in dialogue about how the strategy can be further improved; and gathering what has been learned from all these reports about the condition of education in England, and how it might become even better.

## 8 Multi-perspective inspection

### Looking at the roots

The development of league tables organised around the performance of school students in standardised tests and published in national newspapers, and the use of data from tests to inform the judgements that Ofsted makes about schools, has caused the tracking of students' current and likely future performance to become a central preoccupation of everyone working in schools.

We have already argued that these proxy indicators are inadequate to determine the quality of the inputs provided by leaders, teachers and other staff, and that they lead to perverse outcomes for students. They also provide a poor guide to 'why' particular things are happening. A report from BERA observes that attainment data do not reveal 'what it is about the lives and educational experiences of particular groups of children and young people that leads them to underachieve at school', nor indicate 'what can be done to shape the underlying dynamics in ways which might help them'.<sup>67</sup>

In the absence of anything else, attainment data tend to be deployed to justify whatever explanation people come up with: human beings are naturally prone to prefer the comfort of 'knowing' to the discomfort associated with uncertainty. This may lead to an individual teacher being criticised for poor performance that could be better explained by a series of unfortunate management decisions, or a new school leadership team gaining the credit for the accumulated effort over many years of parents, teachers and non-teaching staff. The consequences – whether a teacher is demoralised or a leadership team buoyed up by unjustified self-confidence – are clearly unhelpful in enabling schools to become even better.

We talked earlier about the need for a national conversation to develop a new approach to qualifications and targets. While this would provide different forms of attainment data, it will not necessarily provide new information on *why* things are working as they are. For multi-perspective inspection to work, schools need to collect data that look at the school in relation to the quality of its inputs, not just its outcomes. This is about the quality of its culture, how the combined impact of the way it does things affects people's capacity to teach and learn. As a report from Teach First Ambassadors has argued, schools need sophisticated ways of tracking their ethos: 'Whilst it is fairly simple to establish a behaviour policy and a new badge, it is harder to constantly monitor the experience of over 1000 pupils to ensure that their experience is consistent with the school's ethos and culture.' The authors argue that building the capacity of schools to focus on ethos would produce 'huge benefits for little financial cost'.<sup>68</sup>

There is an extensive literature about the impact of school culture and ethos on attainment.<sup>69</sup> Research has shown that students with poor school performance often do not perceive themselves as belonging to the school community; as a result they lose the motivation to get their performance back on track.<sup>70</sup> A detailed analysis of the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme implemented in England by the last Labour Government has shown that whole-school practices related to SEAL were statistically linked to superior achievement and lower persistent absence, via a more positive overall ethos of the school.<sup>71</sup> Strikingly, nearly 50 per cent of school-level variance in Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 attainment results could be accounted for by differences in ethos and the whole-school implementation of SEAL. The same theme is highlighted in reports that Ofsted has produced on the importance of school ethos in re-engaging disaffected and reluctant students and closing the attainment gap.<sup>72</sup>

A report from the 24-country Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on how to achieve equity in education argues that *all* students can attain high-level

skills, regardless of their personal and socio-economic circumstances, by increasing the frequency and quality of student–student and student–teacher interactions:

*When students feel recognised and do not fear being embarrassed or compared to peers, they are more likely to identify positively with school, use cognitive strategies that contribute to academic success and feel confident in their ability to learn.*<sup>73</sup>

Analysis of data collected from 90 schools (involving nearly 30,000 pupils and 5,000 staff) using the PROGRESS diagnostic (see below) shows that the way pupils perceive the school climate is linked to the way they rate themselves as learners. More specifically, the more they see themselves as belonging (safe and important in the school and connected to the school and the people in it), the more likely they are to attain higher grades at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4.

Other research has shown that socio-economic background (as measured by the number of children on free school meals) has a negative impact on attainment.<sup>74</sup> The exciting thing about the data from PROGRESS is that even when we statistically control for free school meals the link between a sense of belonging and attainment remains. Thus a strong sense of belonging – defined as feeling safe and important – within the school environment counteracts the negative impact of socio-economic background (as measured by free school meals). In other words, and as figure 2 demonstrates, school climate or ethos appears to play a crucial role in reducing the impact of socio-economic factors on attainment. The news is exciting because socio-economic factors are difficult to shift, but ethos is something we can affect far more easily. It is under the control of school leaders and managers.

Figure 2 **Standardised attainment of children on free school meals, showing PROGRESS scores**

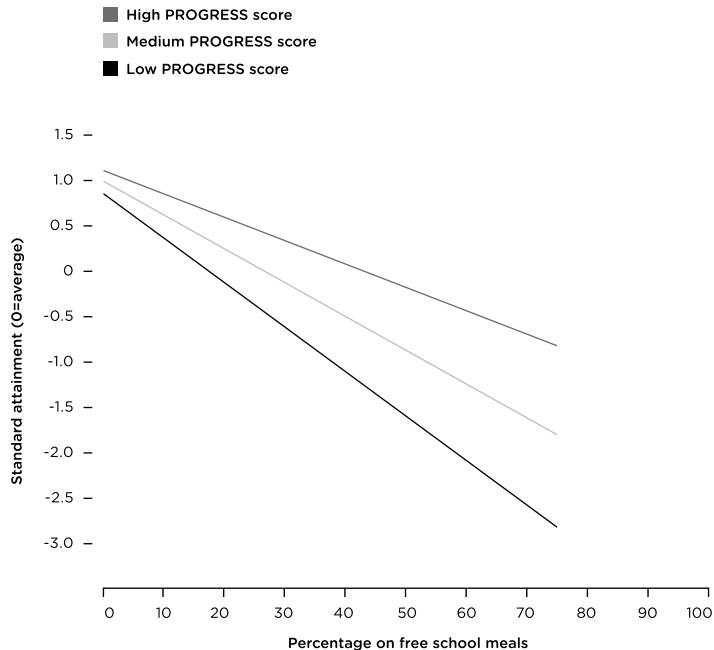


Figure 2 shows how the negative effect of free school meals on attainment is moderated by pupils' sense of belonging. Where students score positively on belonging (the green line), attainment is higher in standardised tests than when students score lower on belonging (red line), even when the percentage of free school meals is as high as 70 per cent.

One way of describing the interaction between culture and outcomes is to think of each school as a tree in a forest of trees. We currently have a system where the owners of that forest spend a lot of time examining the quality of its leaves. Are there enough of them? Are they the right shape and colour? How different are the brown and shrivelled ones

from those with a healthy texture? So carefully are these things measured that they have become the focus of attention for the foresters. But it would be much better if their attention were to be focused on creating the conditions that enables trees to grow well: nourishing the soil, cutting back branches to let in the light, keeping pests away from the trunk of the tree. If they were to do that, who knows how much more vibrant and splendid the forest might become?

Our proposal is that multi-perspective inspection starts with the school community exploring together the impact of this soil, the factors that influence the quality of teaching and learning. It was to achieve this that Antidote developed the PROGRESS diagnostic, which explores questions such as these: Do students feel they get a response when they try to sort out the things that might get in the way of their learning? Are the messages they receive from adults ones that strengthen their confidence in their capacity to learn and grow? And do staff feel that their viewpoints are taken into account when decisions are made? We also ask parents about the perceptions they pick up from their children, and about how far their dealings with staff and leaders helps them support their children in learning and achieving. Table 1 shows the dimensions of staff and student experience measured by the PROGRESS diagnostic.

The diagnostic collects the information through rating questions and open questions. The rating questions generate quantitative data, which can be compared with those collected from other schools. Open questions, by contrast, allow all members of the school community to describe what they experience in their own words. There is sufficient guarantee of anonymity to enable complete openness and honesty: nobody needs to fear being judged or having to face any other form of comeback. We say that we are interested in what was said, not in who said it. This is important if people are to be completely open in describing their experience.

Table 1 **The dimensions of staff and student experience measured by the PROGRESS diagnostic**

Staff	Listened to:	Capable:	Enabled:	Trusted:	
	'My views are heard and will be taken into account when decisions are made'	'The feedback I receive assures me that I am making a positive contribution to the school'	'Things are organised in ways that enable me to get things done without becoming over-stressed'	'I am given the level of responsibility I need to achieve the goals that are set for me'	
Students	Responsive:	Confidence-building:	Connecting to peers:	Connecting to adults:	Engaged:
	'The school works to ensure the things which might get in the way of my learning are addressed'	'The school provides the backing I need to keep on learning even when it is difficult'	'Other students foster my belief that others are interested in what I think and feel'	'School staff provide me with the support I need if I am to grow as a learner and as a person'	'I can see the point of what I am learning and I value the experience'

The PROGRESS diagnostic also collects information about how students rate themselves as learners and on their personal effectiveness. Comparing this with the data on culture opens up the possibility of a much richer conversation about the way in which young people's experience of school influences their capacity to learn, grow and achieve.

### A different sort of conversation

Collecting data that probe beneath surface outcomes starts the process of finding out what is really going on. But the answers have to come from an extended conversation that involves the whole school community and allows the experiences of different groups to be articulated and processed. The process engages everyone, from the youngest student to the most senior member of the leadership team, in describing how they currently experience the school, thinking with others about what holds

the school back from being as good as it can possibly be, and generating new thinking about how to make things even better.

The case study below gives a flavour of how this sort of conversation is developed in the PROGRESS process. This then informs an account of the principles that might inform a process of multi-perspective inspection.<sup>75</sup>

case study

*Antidote was working at a high-performing secondary school in south London that had been judged 'outstanding' by Ofsted in 2007, and was judged similarly in 2010 after we had been working with the school.*

*The initial data collected from this school revealed that both staff and students enjoyed being part of an innovative, creative and dynamic school. Young people valued the opportunities and experiences they were offered. Staff valued being at the 'cutting edge' of new developments in education. The senior team invited and embraced new initiatives, rarely turning down any project on offer. The result was a school that performed well and 'buzzed' with vibrant activity.*

*But there was another side to this picture: adults reported that they felt highly stressed. They didn't feel they had time to reflect. They were starting to feel depressed rather than energised by the challenges of working in the school. As for the students, their response to teachers being busy and distracted was to conclude that their views and opinions were not valued, and that adults cared more about their teaching than about students learning. These findings were presented in the flow diagram shown in figure 3, which were used to inform the search for solutions.*

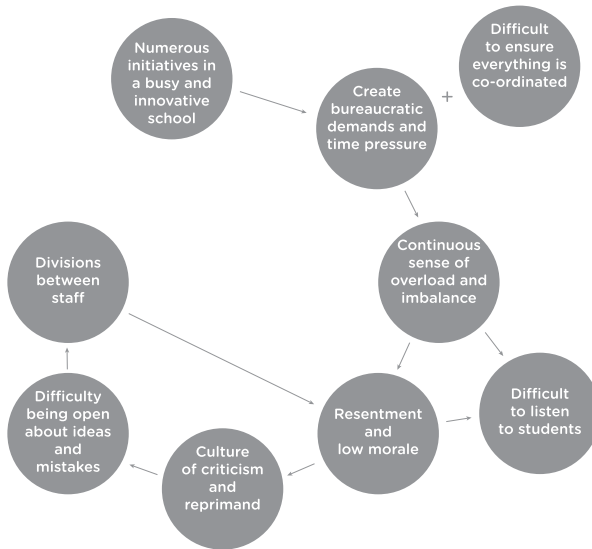
*The analysis that was developed showed that staff and students were beginning to become locked into a self-defeating cycle. Students were starting to behave badly in response to their feeling that the school did not care about them. In response, staff would put aside their more innovative ideas and adopt more didactic teaching styles. To the well-established frustration of the better-behaved students at the way their more turbulent peers received so much attention was then added resentment at the loss of opportunities for enjoyable learning.*



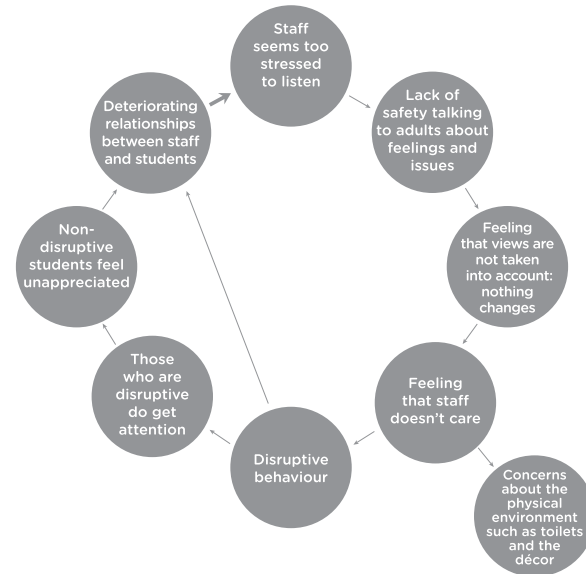
*Presented with these data the staff felt angry and confused at first. How could the students interpret their dedication and hard work as representing a lack of interest and care? But once they accepted that this was the perception held by the students, they began to come up with ideas for improving things. Gathered together with ideas that emerged from the students, these became the basis for the strategy that was implemented in the next phase. These produced some immediate quick wins, as well as the longer-term improvements described below.*

Figure 3 **Staff and students' comments on life in a high-performing secondary school**

**Staff picture**



**Student picture**



These staff and student flow diagrams present findings about what is happening that emerged through an exploration of the data collected at a high-performing secondary school. They are used to stimulate people to come up with ideas for building on strengths and addressing the issues identified.

The ideas that came up were mapped onto the strategy framework shown in figure 4. After changes to meeting schedules and the timing of the school day the school fairly quickly became a calmer and more focused place. Time spent on building stronger relationships contributed to staff capacity to become more open and fair in their dealings with young people, ensuring that they felt sufficiently heard to get on with using the opportunities for learning that were available to them. Among the innovations that came from students was a system for lesson observation that provided feedback to their teachers on factors such as the level of student interest and involvement, pace,

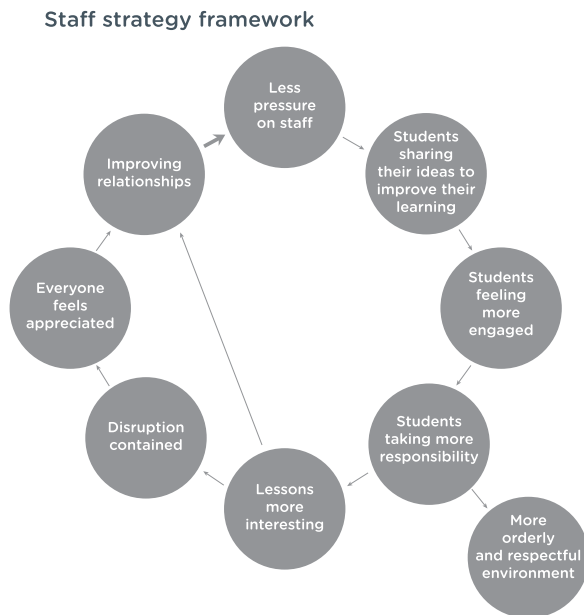


variety of activities and inclusion of different learning styles.

Two years after Antidote started working with the school described above, Ofsted said in its letter to students:

*It is a very happy and special place because of the exceptional care and support that it provides and the opportunities for everyone to have an equal chance to learn and achieve. We were very impressed with the respect that you show each other and your excellent behaviour. You get on very well with all the teachers and the adults who support you which helps you to make good progress and achieve good results in examinations.*

Figure 4 **Staff and students' strategy framework in a high-performing secondary school**



### Student strategy framework



The diagrams shown in figures 3 and 4 enable staff and students to think about where the most strategic interventions are likely to be and how a change in one aspect of school life can have a knock-on impact elsewhere, ultimately creating positive and self-sustaining cycles of improvement.

### Familiarise and identify

The PROGRESS conversation starts with feedback on the data collected through the diagnostic. Which dimensions are rated strong? Which dimensions are less strong? How does our school compare with other schools that are otherwise similar to us in social makeup and performance? How do our results compare with last year's? How do the ratings by the members of different student year groups or staff groups compare with each other? What are people saying about their experiences that explains the numbers? While the quantitative data allow

the results from different groups to be compared, and for the results to be compared with those for other schools, the themes that emerge in answers to open questions suggest possible explanations. Figure 5 is a flow diagram illustrating the PROGRESS process.

Figure 5 The PROGRESS process



These data turn difficult and uncomfortable issues – which can profoundly affect an individual’s capacity to perform – feelings of being ignored, labelled or sidelined – into topics that can be constructively discussed by everyone. The headteacher who is told by a teacher that there are rumblings of discontent in the staffroom can easily dismiss

such views as an individual’s distorted viewpoint. Presented in a depersonalised form as the findings from a confidential survey, they cannot so easily be swept aside.

The feedback enables people to start recognising that others may have perspectives which are different from their own. This can be difficult for some: teachers, students and parents may want to believe that their viewpoint is shared by nearly everybody else, and that the school in their head is the same as the school that is actually out there. The role of the accredited external agency hired by the school (as described above) is to keep the space open for these different perspectives to be heard and reflected on, and to keep that space open long enough for people to really see that others behave differently because they experience things differently, and to realise that ways of making things work even better can only be found by taking this understanding into account.

#### Understand and interpret

Giving staff and students opportunities to talk to each other about the feedback from the PROGRESS intervention starts the process of generating a deeper understanding of what is really going on. Groups of staff and students take responsibility for organising these conversations, channelling people’s ideas as they emerge and keeping the conversations going so as to ensure everyone has the opportunity to become engaged so that no viewpoints are pushed under the carpet; everyone stays focused on what is *really* going on.

Some will speak timidly and quietly at the start, fearing perhaps that their views will stir resentment, or that they are alone in thinking as they do. Others will be passionate and vociferous, desirous of having their favourite solution implemented straightaway; sometimes they have been arguing their case on this for years. Enabling each person to be heard alongside each other, at the same pitch so that they can be reflected on, enables the development of deeper insights into what is going on. The vociferousness of some starts to die down as people discover that they are really being heard, their viewpoint is genuinely considered valid.

The feedback from these initial questions is formulated into a set of additional questions for staff and students to explore online: ‘Does this viewpoint, expressed by one of your colleagues, have any resonance for you?’; ‘A number of people thought this might be the explanation for what is happening: do you agree?’; ‘What other ideas have emerged from the conversations you have had about the data?’; ‘Is there any other way you can see to explain what is happening?’

As these perspectives are gathered up, the pattern of the interactions happening in the school starts to emerge, both where they help to promote learning and where they block it. These are formulated into a flow diagram, showing the impact that people are having on each other. This then becomes the stimulus to a new set of conversations: ‘Given that this is what is happening, what can we do together to make things even better?’ This conversation recognises that, since everybody has *some* responsibility for what happens – as the flow diagram shows – everybody can contribute to bringing about improvement.

Our experience is that when people can talk honestly with each other about their experiences, thoughts and ideas, they become steadily more prepared to take an interest in what other people are experiencing. The understanding that emerges from sharing experience stimulates deeper thinking about what is happening, and more creative ideas for making things even better. The experience of participation in an open conversation also makes people more confident to speak up and become engaged with others: ‘You should always speak up and be confident to tell what you feel,’ said one Year 6 boy when asked what he had learned from taking part in PROGRESS. ‘Before, I would definitely hold everything inside. But now I know that things will change.’

#### **Create and develop**

The flow diagrams generated through these discussions are used to trigger people’s ideas for making things better. The quality of these ideas comes from their being linked to an account of what is happening, one that represents the

accumulated understanding of everyone who has taken part so far. They are invited to say how the idea they are putting forward will address the situation that has been presented. When these ideas have been grouped, people can then work on turning the grains of creativity into something that can be turned into a plan. Often the ideas put forward are reworkings of things that have been tried before. Sometimes ideas that seem weak at first grow into a powerful strategy that can make a real impact. This most often happens when staff and students start to generate thinking together.

#### **Implement and integrate**

The process described above is designed to generate a strategy that:

- is informed by the collective intelligence of people at the heart of the school
- gets to the heart of the issues that need addressing
- draws productively on the resources available within the school.

There is the opportunity in this phase to try out new ideas and to come up with better solutions. The experience of participation in PROGRESS takes people on a journey from feeling powerless to bring about change – and therefore more likely to feel disaffected, demoralised or disengaged – to feeling that they have the capacity to become involved with others in making change possible. As individuals make this discovery, they influence each other to form a culture where people are continuously identifying issues, tackling problems and revising approaches that initially do not work to find ways of making them do so.

#### **Review and reappraise**

In the second year, the PROGRESS process starts by stakeholders reviewing the impact of the changes that have been implemented. What has worked and what has not?

What knock-on benefits or deficits have arisen? What new situations have arisen? That begins the process of generating a new strategy. The aim, throughout the process, is to set in motion cycles of change that have the capacity to generate sustainable ongoing improvement.

### The inspectorate's role

The teaching profession has often pleaded for Ofsted to become an improvement agency *as well as* an inspection agency: 'I want the people who are holding me to account to be part of the journey of making me better,' Vic Goddard, the head of Passmore's Academy, has said.<sup>76</sup>

The customary response from Ofsted is that it would compromise the objectivity of external evaluation if the agency were seen to have a role in shaping the improvement measures whose effectiveness it then has to evaluate.<sup>77</sup> This is a sound argument. The logic of our proposal is that the agency *gives up* arguing for the value of 'objective' external judgement over 'subjective' internal judgement, and starts defining a new role for itself as an improvement agency.

The ideas collected from staff and students are mapped onto the original flow diagrams to show how they will contribute to a better overall teaching and learning environment. They also show how the two sets of ideas have the potential to impact positively on each other.

We have several times referred in this report to the valuable role that Ofsted performs in gathering information about what schools around England are doing, and synthesising this into reports on what is successful. When Christine Gilbert was chief inspector (2006–12), she suggested that the agency could do more to find useful ways of disseminating this sort of information to schools.

Our proposal for multi-perspective inspection would direct the agency's focus away from making judgements about schools to collecting data on innovative and inspiring work that is going on, and providing guidance on what works in particular contexts. It would be performing for the whole

education system a function akin to that carried out by the Education Endowment Foundation for one aspect of it: how schools can enable children and young people from disadvantaged socio-economic groups to achieve on a par with their more privileged contemporaries. The Foundation develops this information into tools that help schools to make good decisions about how to allocate the money that comes to them through the pupil premium.

The responsibility for producing reports about schools, making judgements about their qualities and defects, and providing an account of these to wider stakeholders would be transferred from Ofsted to the parents, teachers, other staff and students of a particular school, working with an external partner chosen by them from a list of accredited organisations. They would be required to produce such a report once a year, and to do so by gathering data about everyone's experience of school; working together to develop an agreed understanding of what that data was saying; and pooling their creativity to come up with a strategy for making the school an even better place in which to learn, where everybody has the best possible opportunity to learn, grow and achieve.

The validity of this sort of multi-perspective inspection would largely derive from the requirement to reconcile the perspectives of multiple participants. One group of parents experiences the leadership of the school in this way, so what is happening that leads to another group feeling differently? This is what one group of students feel about their experience of learning. What is different about this other group that sees things differently? What is happening for teaching assistants that the experience they report is so much less positive than that of the teachers? The imperative to show each group that their experience has been heard and that the final report reflects that experience will give the report more depth and value than those currently put together by external inspectors.

Ofsted (or a renamed and remodelled agency) would analyse these reports before engaging in a dialogue with schools about how the plan it has come up with might be further improved. It would draw on its growing database of

innovative and exploratory practice if it considered there was a need to argue that the strategy being adopted might not be adequate to address the objective being sought. It could help schools that seemed to be at similar stages in the development of an interesting approach to work together, or suggest a learning visit to a school that was further down the line in implementing a particular set of ideas. It might occasionally have to blow the whistle on a school that appeared not to have involved all stakeholders in the production of its report, or not to have come up with a convincing explanation of its data or plan for improvement. It could investigate if a group of teachers, students or parents were to report online that their views had been misrepresented. In some cases, there might be the need to intervene on behalf of the school community against a stubborn leader. The overall objective, however, would be to position the agency as one that was learning from and with schools, enabling them to be even more successful at what they do, rather than judging them as it does at present.

Such a proposal is coherent with the argument for the development of a self-improving school system that have been put forward by David Hargreaves in a series of papers commissioned by the National College for School Leadership. He argues that we need to move away from a situation where ‘bureaucratic, top-down systems of monitoring to check on school quality’ lead to ‘the imposition of improvement strategies that are relatively insensitive to local context’, towards one where schools can ‘break free from a dependency culture in which the solutions to school problems are thought to lie somewhere beyond the schools themselves’. He proposes that this is best achieved by schools forming themselves into clusters where they take ownership of their problems, work together to diagnose the source of those problems and devise solutions that are in their mutual interest. He also suggests that this requires the development of system leadership that incorporates not only school staff at every level, but students as well. This is because ‘it is when people believe they are given real and regular opportunities to exercise leadership that they use their talents to the full and willingly share their knowledge and skills’.<sup>78</sup>

Figure 6 The proposed annual accountability cycle



### The benefits of multi-perspective inspection

Multi-perspective inspection would bring all the school’s stakeholders together to shape their tacit knowledge of what is going on into an account of the school’s learning culture and of where the possibilities for improvement were to be found. This would provide a much more compelling and potentially powerful form of accountability than one which draws on the judgements made by external visitors to the school. It would provide parents and other stakeholders with a rich account of what the school is actually like, *and* enable the school to discover effective pathways towards further improvement.

These are the key advantages of this approach:

- The analysis and the solutions would be *generated from within* the school, rather than being *imposed on* the school. They would therefore be much more likely to achieve buy-in from across the whole school community. This is an important key to effective implementation.
- Carried out regularly, multi-perspective inspection (figure 6) would enable schools to generate much more up-to-date accounts of themselves than are made available to parents and other stakeholders through the current Ofsted process (in some cases a school judged ‘outstanding’ would never again have need of the Ofsted mirror). Clearly, too, the reports would be deeper, less formulaic, and more concerned to communicate what was really going on because there was no pressure to reach a judgemental conclusion, and more responsive to what parents wanted to know because parents were involved in their creation. A report by Fiona Millar and Gemma Wood found that parents wanted more information than they were currently being provided ‘about teaching quality, behaviour, bullying, exclusions, the progress of particular groups of pupils, their well-being and their social and emotional development’. They argued that this could best be provided by enabling schools to find ‘safe ways of sharing the views of existing parents and pupils on a wide range of issues within the school community’.<sup>79</sup>
- Multi-perspective inspection would enable the school to model the sort of robust learning skills that will serve young people best as they move into adult life – grappling with complexity rather than making do with simplistic accounts of things; being tough-minded in resisting easy explanations or quick-fix solutions; drawing on all the resources available to find solutions to sticky real-life problems; and working collaboratively together to achieve shared goals.
- This model would integrate the processes of research into the daily life of teachers and other staff: styles of teaching and

learning could be fine-tuned around an exploration of the learning profiles of particular classes; teachers and lunchtime staff could have an interesting conversation about how the interpersonal dynamics of the playground are carried over into the classroom; parents could feed into this conversation their own sense of what is happening for their children; teachers and students could think creatively about how these dynamics could be used to stimulate an even richer experience of learning. Leadership teams could reflect on how their own dynamics reverberate through the school’s organisational processes in ways that would not otherwise become apparent; parents could draw on their own management experience to suggest other ways of thinking about things.

Additionally, it is a model of accountability that would provide staff, students and parents with the opportunity to be more actively engaged in school life than is currently allowed for or encouraged: lunch supervisors and teaching assistants conversing with teachers about how children should be spoken to; parents providing input from their professional experience on questions of organisational strategy and day-to-day management; and children having the opportunity to develop a sense of personal agency through participation in discussions about management or the playground or the way they experience learning.

Multi-perspective inspection would respond to the call in the Cambridge Primary Review for a reinvention of ‘parental and community engagement in schools and the curriculum’.<sup>80</sup> It is also likely that it would strengthen the feeling of community and mutual understanding within schools, as staff, students and parents were drawn together in shared enquiry. It would provide an experience of participation that generates collective buy-in to the strategies that emerge, leading to more successful implementation, and build stronger relationships between staff and students as they foster the development of social, emotional, intellectual and meta-cognitive skills.

## 9 Conclusion and recommendations

We have heard a lot in recent years about the benefits of freeing schools from central control to develop strategies for improvement rooted in their own experience, insights and creativity. The obvious next step is to ensure that the assessment and accountability system is designed to ensure that *all* the intelligence available – from teachers, other staff, students and parents – is directed towards improving the educational opportunities available to all children and young people.

In order to achieve this, this report recommends that the Government should:

- *empower students* by radically increasing the available choice of tests and qualifications at the end of Key Stage 2 (aged 10–11) and Key Stage 4 (aged 15–16), and enabling students to choose those that will best display their knowledge and skills
- *move towards an accountability system built around multi-perspective inspection*, to value the perspectives that leaders, staff, students, parents and inspectors have about a school's performance, instead of allowing the judgements of one group to prevail against those of others.

Taken together these changes to the assessment and accountability system would:

- help ensure all young people had a rich experience of learning that enabled them to develop a portfolio of useful skills
- generate richer, more revealing and more useful accounts of each school's strengths and weaknesses

- mobilise powerful creative energy across the school community, which could be channelled in ways that ensured all schools were on a path to steady improvement, and all children and young people were offered the best possible opportunities to learn and to grow.



# Notes

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This report takes aim at the target-driven accountability in the English education system: principally, the Ofsted inspection regime, tests and school league tables. For the past twenty years, teachers and school leaders have worked under this regime in one form or another. The argument of this report is that this has proved profoundly toxic, damaging trust between staff, pupils, parents and policy makers, leading to adverse outcomes for students.

*Detoxifying School Accountability* proposes an alternative model, one which is built around multi-perspective inspection. Such a model would value the opinions of leaders, staff, students, parents and inspectors about a school's performance, instead of allowing the judgements of one group to prevail against others. The report also outlines the potential to empower students by providing them with a wider choice of tests and qualifications to display their knowledge and skills.

The report argues that, taken together, these changes would generate richer, more useful accounts of each school's strengths and weaknesses, achieve greater buy-in from all key stakeholders and guarantee all schools are on a path to steady improvement. In turn, this would help to ensure that all young people have a rich experience of learning, and the best possible opportunity to learn.

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