

Adding value?

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There seems to be growing consensus that comparing schools by raw attainment scores (SATs & GCSEs) is unfair. The achievements that pupils bring with them to the school situation, often linked with their access to social and cultural capital, can affect subsequent performance. Logic and evidence argue that we should take account of pre-existing input achievements of pupils. Such a move towards 'value-added' measures, where it is principally initial achievement that is accounted for, is often seen as a fairer way of measuring precisely how well schools are doing. But how fair is it?

By focussing on measuring *progress* rather than final attainment we are assuming that we are now giving schools an equal playing field for comparison. But there are flaws in this stance. First, we know that taking account of intake at a single prior time, is an inadequate adjustment since earlier experiences also affect final attainment. Secondly,, because of the relatively small numbers of pupils involved in any one school cohort, the uncertainty (or confidence)

interval for each school's value added score is typically very wide, and typically in more than half of the cases means that a school cannot be statistically distinguished from the average, let alone be given a ranking with any precision. Thirdly, pupils move between schools and unless this is taken into account, we will have biased results. Fourthly, advantages of access to social and cultural capital are extremely difficult to measure yet it is reasonable to assume that they are important factors that affect pupils' progress through school. Progress can rarely be only to do with school, though of course, schools have an enormous contribution to make.

All of these issues make value added comparisons between schools difficult, although, given the appropriate information, not impossible. Consequently, when presenting any comparisons there have need to be serious caveats about what it is legitimate to conclude. As a general rule value-added comparisons should be treated as 'screening instruments' which may point to particular problems, but they cannot be diagnoses that allow unequivocal descriptions of schools being 'failures' or 'successes'.

All of this suggests that the best use of value-added comparisons is for LEAs and schools to provide additional information, in confidence, about school performance, set alongside, and not dominating, other factors, especially when disaggregated to individual

school subjects or departments. Some LEAs are already doing this successfully.

It is perfectly legitimate to ask, given what we know about the quality of performance data, and also most importantly about the severe negative side effects of league tables, whether there is anything to be gained by publicly displayed rankings. One of the responses that policy makers sometimes make to this point is that *not to* publish information about school performance is withholding information from the public. However, without publishing the caveats, we would argue, Government is itself guilty of publishing *misleading* information.

Other Governments (e.g. Wales, Ireland, and Scotland) agree with this and have accepted these criticisms, for example by refusing to publish rankings of schools. A key test of integrity for the UK Government, as it begins to publish value-added tables of English schools, is whether they too have the courage to accept the limitations or whether they will continue to claim that league tables (value-added or any other) of schools allow precise comparisons and diagnoses. To date, with publication of KS2-KS3 and KS3-KS4 value-added tables, the indications are far from promising. Confidence intervals have not been provided and none of the important caveats that we have described are even alluded to by the DfES. There needs to be more transparency and honesty about the limitations.

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John Izbicki

What's in a name? The Bard was, of course, right when he suggested that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. The names we have been given at birth are important to us and we change them only under duress. My parents and I were once thus confronted. Izbicki, being Russo-Polish, is not easy to pronounce, but what name to choose?

At that time, we could not afford to do it by deed poll but a free name change could be obtained from the Food Office, believe it or not, on presentation of our identity cards. The changed name would have to begin with the same initial letter, so we considered Isleworth, Iliffe, Isherwood... In the end, we simply could not bring ourselves to give up the name of our ancestors. I must confess

that towards the beginning of my 23 years with *The Daily Telegraph*, my stories remained un-by-lined because "your name is so - er - foreign". And so, for nearly a year, my reports were written under my middle name: John Howard.

To some people names can be anathema. Take for instance Brian Roper, supremo of what was the University of North London and has now become London Metropolitan University, its third name change in 30 years. He declined to approve the publication of the university's history on the occasion of its centenary because it contained a chapter on the crisis it faced while one Patrick Harrington was a student there. Harrington had been unmasked as National Front treasurer. His lectures were boycotted and

demonstrations brought mounted police and teargas to the Holloway Road. Sir Keith Joseph, then education secretary under Mrs Thatcher, was on the point of ordering the closure of the Polytechnic of North London, as it then was.

Another chapter contained the Miller's Tale. Terence Miller was appointed first director of the new polytechnic in 1971 (and remained its chief until 1980). Because he had been principal of the University College of Rhodesia, the Left immediately (and quite wrongly) dubbed him a racist. The poor man faced virtually daily demonstrations by rent-a-mob students and was mercilessly humiliated. He made matters worse by behaving like a sword-wielding knight on a white charger. When he and the student