

External Validation of Research on Pupil Performance

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Suffolk School Organisation Review: Pupil Performance Research Findings

Dear Martin,

Thank you very much for sending me a copy of the School Organisation Review. I am full of admiration at the quality of the report in terms of the way in which the authors have mounted a cogent argument based on a clear analysis of the available data. As is stated in the report Suffolk is in a unique position, in that it is one of the few LEAs with the ability to make useful and valid comparisons between schools operating a two-tier and three-tier arrangement. As such the findings are extremely valuable and worthy of publication to a wider audience.

The data certainly suggest that dips at transfer are an on-going phenomenon and that therefore the more between-school transitions that pupils undertake the greater the likelihood of under-achievement. This is in line with other published work on transfer.

The fact that the three-tier schools appear to make up some ground by the end of Key Stage 4 suggests that better results are obtained when the National tests coincide with the final year in a school. This may be because both teachers and students see the testing process as the culmination of a particular stage in the life-course.

However, the latter point is mere speculation which is where interesting research findings, such as yours, tend to lead. Once again my thanks for letting me see the report and my congratulations, once again for producing research which fully meets accepted academic standards.

Yours Sincerely,

Maurice Galton

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27th March, 2006

Mr Martin Clark
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Dear Mr Clark

Comments on 'School Organization Review'

Thank you for sending me this report. I found it very interesting. You asked me to subject it to rigorous peer review using the same criteria as I would employ for any other piece of research.

I have prepared a fuller report, but I am afraid that an unexpected visit to hospital has delayed its completion.

My overall conclusion is that this is a very comprehensive and thorough piece of work. It brings together a wide range of relevant sources of data and subjects them to detailed scrutiny. Some of these sources (Ofsted and the Fischer Trust) are entirely independent. The range of methods used for the analyses minimises the risk that the findings are not robust. The controls for the social contexts of the communities served by the two systems, in combination with the extensive use of value added data, increase ones confidence that like is being compared with like.

The overall findings are very interesting. They indicate that for most of the comparisons pupils in the two-tier system were ahead of those in the three-tier one. There is little previous research against which to compare these conclusions, but the findings are consistent with other insights available about factors affecting pupils' progress. They deserve serious attention as a contribution to knowledge.

Yours sincerely

Professor John Gray

Summary comments on Suffolk's School Organisation Review

Location of pupils in 'Types' of school

On a brief review of the physical progress of pupils in Suffolk schools it appears that relatively few pupils in Middle schools left to join 11+ entry schools (around 50 in the .GCSE 2005 cohort) This is probably because in a large county such as Suffolk there are 'zones' in which the natural progression is either from Junior school to 11+ entry secondary school or Middle school to 13+ entry secondary school.

There were, however, a substantial number of pupils (around 460) who were originally in Junior schools (either in the county or from 'elsewhere including independents) but who transferred into 13+ entry schools. Of these only 36 were in Suffolk LEA Junior schools, - some 310 of these entrants had been at primary schools in other LEAs. There was missing information on the primary school location of a further 120 of these pupils. The GCSE outcomes of all of these pupils is substantially below that of other pupils and one has to wonder whether this might be as a result of other factors than 'merely' the types of school that they have attended.

Thus it is not straightforward to assess the contribution of each 'type' of schooling system as unambiguously as one might wish.

Comments on the data in the Suffolk School Organisation Review

The key issues are well presented – and constitute a fairly clear indictment of the role of the three tier system in terms of Key Stage 2 performance. Whatever way the analysis is carried out there appears to be a 'deficit' attached to pupils who have been educated in the 3-tier system compared with those in the 'conventional' 2-tier. The Report rightly attached less importance to issues of 'value-added' (particularly between Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3), since, where one tier's absolute level is lower than the other, greater 'added value' may simply be the result of secondary schools helping pupils 'catch up' on the gaps that have been present in their previous educational experiences.

One explanation - that relating to the 'drop' in performance occurring on transfer between schools - seems less likely to be the main issue – since at Key Stage 3, pupils from the 3-tier system (who have, by then, only been one year in secondary school) do almost as well as those from the 2-tier system who have had three full years in the secondary schools. In fact pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds in the 3-tier system actually did slightly better at Ks3 than their peers from the 2-tier group.

The differences at Key Stage 2 are surprisingly large, and when I carried out an earlier investigation comparing 'Middle School' provision compared with Junior Schools (for QCA) some years ago this was the one uncontested result from that analysis.

Where a performance indicator is a 'terminal' one for a school (such as Ks2 for Junior schools) it is likely that greater emphasis is placed on pupils' performance by all teachers of Years 5 and 6. Such attention *may* be less common as a whole school focus in 'Middle schools' simply because pupils remain within the same school and 'deficiencies' in performance may be seen as 'repairable' over the longer term

through which such schools have responsibility for their pupils. (This could, in fact, be an argument for the maintenance of the 3-tier system for such pupils were it not for the equally tenable hypothesis that if attention to such ‘deficits’ had been given earlier such pupils may well not have ‘fallen behind’ by the end of Key Stage 2.)

Subject areas

The emergence of systematic differences between pupils’ outcomes at Key Stage 2 is particularly noticeable in Mathematics at both Levels 4 and above (74% vs 68%) and 5 and above (30% vs 23%). There are some worrying signs also about lower performance at Level 5 or above in Science (44% vs 36%).

The Mathematics comparison is of particular concern since the new indicator of secondary school performance (%5+ A*C passes including English & Maths) places much greater emphasis on pupils’ outcomes in GCSE Mathematics than heretofore.

Final comments

Comparing GCSE performances of pupils from the ‘straightforward’ transfers (from Junior to 11+ entry, and Middle schools to 13+ entry) proves less of a outcome contrast than overall comparisons (mainly due to the presence of the ‘unusual’ pupils described at the outset of this report). The table below gives the average outcomes of pupils educated totally within the Suffolk 2 and 3 tier system.

Transfer	No’s	Ks2 Pts	%5+	Inc EnMa	Eng	Maths	Sci
Junior – 11+	3412	27.1	60%	48%	63%	55%	62%
Middle – 13*	4028	26.8	59%	46%	62%	54%	57%

Conclusion

Whilst accepting that there are severe differences in the Ks2 outcomes of pupils within the 2- and 3-tier systems, it is suggested that further attention be given to the impact of ‘cross-border’ pupils who form a small, but possibly influential, minority of pupils in 13+ entry schools.

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13 June 2006

Dear Martin

School Organisation Review

I enjoyed reading the report entitled "School Organisation Review" and wrote a commentary, which you now have. This letter summarises the main points.

The review is a very clear and thorough report, which is based on all of the available data. It goes through the issues methodically and carefully, taking a balanced view, and sets out the results and analysis clearly. Because of this my commentary does not address specifics but rather takes up a few general issues, about the quality of the data on which the report is based and on the movement of pupils, which may be worth investigating further. There are other, longer-term possibilities.

As is acknowledged in the report, the Free School Meals information is not ideal. It is a yes/no variable and it does not show the extent of deprivation or affluence and whilst the use of postcodes linked to deprivation indices helps to solve that issue it creates a new problem. The measure is of neighbourhoods from which children come rather than specific measures of the individual child. There are also difficulties with some of the Key Stage data and the Foundation Stage Profile. The latter is really of suspect quality and the Key Stage 1 data is also very variable, although by the time one gets to Key Stage 3, GCSE, and A level the quality of the data is generally very good.

Pupil mobility could have a bearing on some of the findings. It could be that some parents choose to move their children from one situation to another; that might particularly happen at A level, but it may also happen for other age groups and if one were able to get a handle on the extent to which mobility is an issue, it would be useful.

Additionally, it might be worth noting that as the result of work that we carried out in Newcastle, known as the Newcastle Commission, we now know more about the relative importance of LEAs in changing the attainment levels of pupils. The quantitative analyses concluded that by far the most important part of the educational system is the teachers and that the most important thing that an LEA can do is to enhance the quality of teaching in the classroom.

One other point, independent baseline data is used to good effect across much of England. These data can circumvent some of the difficulties associated with statutory tests.

Professor Peter Tymms MA MEd PhD (Director)
Robert Coe BA PGCE MPhil PhD (Secondary Director)
Mark Wightman BSc (Operations Manager)

Investing in excellence in teaching and research

Finally, I should like to repeat that I feel the report was very well done. It provides a very fair balanced view of what is happening.

Best wishes.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Peter Tymms". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.

Professor Peter Tymms