

## **CAUGHT IN THE ACT CONFERENCE – 19 NOVEMBER 2011**

### **Workshop notes**

#### **Christine Blowers and Sam Ellis**

##### **International comparisons, PISA etc**

It was said that according to PISA the key characteristics of high achieving systems are that they are inclusive, spend on teacher education and promote problem solving and creative thinking. But our curriculum is becoming more mechanistic and teacher education reduced to “craft skills”.

Delegates recognised that there are issues with the PISA process but nevertheless felt that the messages about what works internationally is not being heard. It seems that a particular ideology is dominant and there is huge pressure on schools to conform and not challenge it.

A delegate from the York Education Media Centre described an initiative to enhance media and public access to education research<sup>1</sup>. There is a parliamentary reception on Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> Nov. She also gave an anecdote from Phil Willis that DfE officials had told him that they were under orders only to find evidence that supports policy.

##### **Finance issues**

Sam Ellis presented a tool for the calculation of pupil teacher ratios and for assessing the impact of changes in pupil numbers. This illustrated how, if a surplus of places is created, say by a free school opening, a school can quickly become unviable.

It was pointed out that the pupil premium is a flat rate throughout the country, taking no account of different area costs.

It was also pointed out that the IFS has shown that before the introduction of the pupil premium, there was specific funding to support disadvantaged pupils in schools to the tune of £2k to £3k per pupil (cf pupil premium currently £488) and that this increased significantly under the Labour government. It is important to challenge the assertion that funding to support disadvantaged pupils is a coalition invention.

It was spelt out that LACSEG (the money academies get to carry out LA functions) is more than schools actually need. This is however likely to be temporary. The reasons are obscure but for many converter academies (ie schools with favoured intakes) it may be because they received less from some LA services such as SEN & behaviour support.

It was also pointed out by a delegate who had done research in Suffolk academies that costs of things like insurance and Capita licences are much higher for individual academies ... a waste of public money.

In Sam's view, most conversions are financially driven. He pointed out that the one thing all academies have in common is that heads salaries go up!

##### **Points made in general discussion**

- Health secretaries don't come in every 18 months and change cardiac surgery .... Why do education secretaries do the equivalent?
- Alberta is an example of a right of centre government adopting inclusive and effective policies. It offers diversity but is managed in the interests of fairness.
- There is a contest between politicians about who can be most parent friendly
- Gove does not believe the system needs managing – he believes the market will drive effectiveness.
- One reason media coverage is poor is that opinion formers have no experience of state schools.
- It was suggested that England is to opt out of the next PISA (see note – opting out of some elements)<sup>2</sup>
- Government policy is a deliberate attempt to prevent equal access to education in the interests of the elite.
- France, for example, has great pride in its national state system and all arguments take place within that context.
- Education in the UK has never had a “1948 moment” (ch NHS)
- A diverse population needs common schools – not schools for each section separately.
- The future is massive private chains of schools – big supermarkets not corner shops!
- Efforts should be made to engage pupils in the debate over school futures
- Grouping by ability in primary classrooms is very common and damaging
- In Haringey there is huge pressure from government. Many pupils do not qualify for FSM because of their immigration status, so reducing resources available. Important to fight at individual level.
- There will at some point be market failure – and pupils will be caught in this during their only chance of getting a good education. Fundamentally immoral.

<sup>1</sup>Extract from CEBE website

The Coalition for Evidence-based Education (CEBE) is currently piloting an Education Media Centre - a new initiative that aims to make education research more accessible to the media and policy makers and so improve policy development, practice and public understanding of education. It will provide users with authoritative, independent and accessible insights from education research in response to current research and policy developments.

Specific aims are to:

- **Save users time** by providing them with a single contact point to a wide range of research expertise.
- **Support the credibility** of users' work by offering timely, impartial and authoritative access to people, publications and evidence.
- **Make research findings more accessible and media-friendly.**

Collaborative approaches such as these have been shown to be powerful ways of improving the transfer of knowledge from research to media and policy settings. In particular, we can learn from the success of the Science Media Centre (SMC), which has become a key channel through which journalists access science research before it hits the headlines.

## **2 Gove rates PISA so highly that England will NOT take part in two elements of the 2012 tests**

Next year is not just Olympic year – it is also when 15-year-olds in 66 countries take part in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey. PISA tests are set every three years by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and governments use information from the tests to plan education policies. Mr Gove has said that PISA is a benchmark by which a country's performance in education can be measured.

Mr Gove says he wants his policies to be underpinned by evidence. You would think, therefore, that he would be keen for English children to participate fully in the next round of PISA tests. However, the [TES](#) has learnt that English children will not take part in two new tests to be introduced in 2012. The official reason is that the Department for Education (DfE) doesn't want to "overburden schools".

So what are the two new optional tests? One is on financial literacy. To be fair to Mr Gove the financial literacy tests will only be taken by 18 of the 66 territories expected to participate in the main PISA tests on maths, reading and science. The second optional test is on problem-solving.

Andreas Schleicher, the OECD official whom Mr Gove described as "[the most important man in English education](#)", is keen on the new problem-solving test. He explained that "we need to assess problem-solving abilities as governments around the world seek to equip young people with the skills they need for life and employment." OECD says these abilities can be

measured through “progressive teaching methods, like problem-based learning and inquiry-based learning”.

Mr Gove is not a fan of such approaches. He criticised the “time and effort spent on cultivating abstract thinking skills” in a [speech](#) because it detracted from “essential” subject knowledge. And that’s probably the reason why English pupils will not take the optional problem-solving test – because the English education system, with its excessive emphasis on exam results, is skewed against the development of these important skills.

Mr Gove says he wants to know how English pupils fare against 15-year-olds in other countries. He should, therefore, ensure that English pupils take all parts of the 2012 tests. If PISA is to be a benchmark then England can’t opt out of the bits in which it is likely to achieve poor results.

(from Local Schools Network website)