

Introduction of league tables for secondary schools education essay



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This essay analyses whether or not league tables encourage schools to achieve a better performance, and whether such tables should be continued. It argues that the introduced league tables have put schools under great pressure, as they are constantly required to perform better than in previous years. This pressure that affects both teachers and pupils limits the necessary and valuable room for making learning and teaching an enjoyable, free and creative endeavour. In this context, the present paper pays particular attention to the issue of school choice and argues that, primarily for reasons of statistical uncertainty, the introduced league tables for English secondary schools are highly misleading. Parents should use the league tables with caution and examine all aspects and not just snapshots of the tables' contents, especially since ways exist for schools to manipulate the results themselves.

Introduction

If one looks into English newspapers, one will come across quite opposing views on the value of league tables for secondary schools in England. While The Sunday Times concludes that " league tables inform choice" (Woodhead, 2008), the Telegraph argues that school league tables are " almost worthless, and do not give parents a true indication of performance and should be scrapped" (Tibbetts, 2008). Two completely different opinions on a topic that has sparked considerable academic and public debate-a topic that is likely to remain a controversial issue and seems thus a worthy subject for further scholarly investigations.

In England, school league tables have been published since 1992 and were first based on raw examination results. They provided information on the

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performance of schools in the public examination at two different stages: When the children were 16 years of age at the end of the compulsory school attendance period and at the end of post-compulsory secondary education when the pupils were 18 years old (West and Hazel, 2000). In other words, the tables reported the average grade of the pupils' General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and illustrated Key Stage 4 and post-16 tables (Directgov, 2010)[1]. In 2002, the Government decided to publish a value-added measure system, as schools vary in the quality of their intakes and raw-scores cannot be seen as independent figures in terms of the previous performance and considering the family background of a child. The new value-added method provided for more accurate information of schools' effects on pupils entering the school (Leckie and Goldstein, 2009). Four years later, a multilevel methodology, called the contextual value-added (CVA) score, had been established. This statistic works by taking into account a child's performance with that of pupils with similar previous attainments and circumstances. The CVA scores, which are published each year by the Government on the Department for Schools, Children and Families' (DCSF) website, make parents aware of these tables, where all English schools are listed in a rank order. Furthermore, the scores are also meant to be used by the schools offering guidance that enables them to improve their performance. The current rankings are produced by the official school inspection system (OFSTED) that controls and regulates English schools at least every three years and provides school-by-school reports.

Building on this brief summary of the league tables' history, this essay will proceed as follows. In a first step, the paper's guiding question will be put

into the general international context of school, university and country rankings (such as PISA[2], PIRLS[3] or TIMSS[4]). This will be followed by a compact overview of the general academic debate on the measurability and comparability of countries', institutions' and individuals' educational performance. A review of relevant literature will present main academic findings on assets and drawbacks of league tables for English secondary schools, before I will discuss these findings in the subsequent section. Finally, the conclusion should allow for a summary of findings, a preliminary answer to the question and an outlook and discussion of the prospects for such rankings.

Ranking educational performance: The international context

Literature review

This review summarizes main academic findings on the pros and cons of school league tables. Much in line with The Sunday Times, which asks why we shouldn't celebrate excellence in the field of education and do not have any competition among schools (Woodhead, 2008), proponents of league tables argue that the results of such contests make it easier to identify good and bad schools (Taylor and Nguyen, 2006). Moreover, the parents would have the choice to find a school where the child can fulfil its potential. Thus, it cannot be a bad idea to compare schools as to their educational success. A second argument brought forward is that the performance tables provide schools and parents with important and useful information. The tables intend to inform parents about the quality of local schools and give orientation, especially since the choice of available schools increased after the Education

Reform Act of 1988 (Gorard, 2006). Parents, it is argued, can now find the best school for their child. A final point made from the proponent's side is that school league tables set targets for test and exam results which would make it easier to indentify schools that do not meet those criteria (Taylor and Nguyen, 2006).

On the other hand, however, the publication of school league tables is seen by a considerable number of academics as a significant disadvantage. As Harvey Goldmann and George Leckie (2009) argue, the tables do not provide clear statements and, therefore, have little to offer as guides for choosing a school. Moreover, they do not tell parents what they need to know (Leckie and Goldstein, 2009 as well as Wilson and Piebalga, 2008). Given that the tables in its entirety are very difficult to understand, parents should, nevertheless, try to examine all aspects and not only snapshots of the tables' contents to gain the whole picture. On this account, a use with caution of the performance tables can be seen as crucial (Hallgarten, 2001). Furthermore, as the most serious weakness of the schools league tables academics recognise the fact that they don't take into account prior attainment of pupils (Taylor and Nguyen, 2006). Last, but not least, there is also a substantial uncertainty in using current results to predict the future value-added performance of schools (Goldstein and Spiegelhauer, 1996). The league tables are largely perceived as problematic, when it comes to the school examination outcomes (Gorard, 2006). Another point is that schools trend to choose the performance indicators that present themselves in the best possible way (Goldstein and Spiegelhauer, 1996). Moreover, the league tables do not use the pupils' individual scores to show how schools have

improved. Thus, misused tables could later cause misunderstandings (Hallgarten, 2001). Given the fact that these tables have somehow a negative image, not all parents use them. It is not only about selecting the best performing school but above all to eliminate those that perform notably poor. Since, the whole idea of indicators is to change institutions' priorities, a concern appears when schools try to change those preferences or leave less measurable goals out (ibid.).

In addition, some side effects of the performance tables show another negative impact on teachers and schools. As they are both under enormous pressure by local authorities, for some staff cheating has become a feasible option. While trying to meet the claims of the central government, this is, without a question, an unacceptable and unnecessary behaviour in a school (Lippset, 2007). Furthermore, secondary school teachers who have lots of stressful moments are sometimes less productive and feel unfulfilled (Teacher Support Network, 2008). Finally, the pressure makes it for teachers even more difficult to focus on borderline C-grade pupils and at the same time ignores the needs of more able students (BBC, 2009).

Discussion

Nowadays, league tables are everywhere. As they have become an important and controversial tool in many different parts of our society, the next section will show the influence these ranking systems have in the field of education.

The first argument analyses whether or not school league tables have operated in a beneficial way for schools and parents and whether the idea of

excellence can be of good use in the educational field. Although there exists already a competitive situation among schools, these competitions, to some extent, make it far easier to detect strong and poor performing schools. Therefore, one could argue that league tables do not merely inform parents and provide them with important information in order to choose the adequate school for their child, but rather set targets for test and exam results (Taylor and Nguyen, 2006).

As Stephen Gorard points out, it is now easier for parents to find the best and suitable school for their child, as league tables inform and give them orientation (2009). Performance tables make it possible to compare one school with another. Owing to the process of competition among schools, it is possible to identify high-rated schools. Parents deserve this kind of information in order to make the right choice. The time when a child goes for the first time to school is for both parents and children, an important moment in their lives. Therefore, the provided information on school performance is seen as a very vital one. Setting test and exam result targets is also a good way for schools to see where they stand and this can, on the other hand, stimulate them to try hard to achieving a better place in the rankings.

However, in contrast, as the tables are very complicated and difficult to understand, they can mislead the user or reader by not providing any clear statement (Wilson and Piebalga, 2008; West and Pennell, 2000). This has largely to do with naming and harming schools which brings up the question whether or not it has a long or good impact. Opponents say it is not only about reforming a school but also damaging its prestige. Additionally, when <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-of-league-tables-for-secondary-schools-education-essay/>

schools compete against each other, they usually try to get more enrolments, attempt to win as well as convince parents. Unfortunately, this has little to do with the well-being of the children or the whole education development of a child.

The systematic inspection of schools and publishing of reports enabled the public to get to know examination results of every single school in England. This process brought a needed transparency into the field of education. The tables might be difficult and complex but most of the parents do not compare apples with oranges while analysing the ranking systems. They are able to make a decent choice (Woodhead, 2008).

In the next paragraph, a crucial limitation of league tables and its impact on schools and parents will be discussed. The following argument will explain the significant disadvantage of these performance tables and how they mislead when it comes to better evaluation of a school's quality and performance.

By using current results to predict the future performance of the schools, a crucial statistical uncertainty can arise. The performing tables neither use pupil's individual score to show how schools have improved nor bear in mind their prior attainment (Taylor and Nguyen, 2006).

When parents today want to choose a school and consider the current data shown by the league tables, they will only receive the information that is based on a group of pupils who is seven years ahead of the group of interest. Thus, one can only anticipate the future school's performance. The fact that the tables leave the pupils' individual score out and do not see the individual

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pupils' background can be subject to criticism, too. Harvey Goldsmith, as one of the strongest opponents of the league tables, asks even for their abolishment (Leckie and Goldsmith, 2008).

According to Joe Hallgarten, another point that can be seen as a very crucial one is that schools use and manipulate the tables to demonstrate their performance in a very good way. They do so by changing priorities and picking the data which suit them best (2001).

Parents are exposed to the league tables and cannot do anything against their manipulation as they obtain the already highlighted schools' promotional material which is part of schools' improvement work (West and Pennell, 2000).

Although the tables show a weakness when it comes to uncertain statistics, on the other hand, they have enormously changed since their first publication in 1992. The latest measure system called contextual value-added, which was mentioned and explained at a previous point in the paper, provides more detailed information not only about the pupils' intake achievement but also about school and pupils' characteristics.

George Leckie and Harvey Goldstein, however, warn that even though, the tables have altered for the better, they still come with a huge uncertainty when it comes to statistics used by the public (2009). Because of the league tables it is now all about figures and no longer about education. But education should be about more than numbers only. It is devastating if a child is making improvements and working hard but its school is at the bottom or near the bottom of the tables. Once parents found a school for <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-of-league-tables-for-secondary-schools-education-essay/>

their child, they can in addition to the information provided by the league tables pay the school a visit and try to receive as much information as possible from local authorities and school prospectuses in order to get a wider picture (Directgov, 2010).

There is also a debate about league tables how they affect communities, schools, teachers and children. The last argument will now focus on the enormous pressure, as another negative impact, caused by these performance tables.

According to Peter Wilby, cheating among teachers has become a common situation in England's schools (2002). As the vast majority of secondary school teachers are overloaded with work, they cannot focus in the same way on all different kind of pupils in their class. Given that fact, many teachers feel exhausted and dissatisfied (BBC, 2009).

Since the league tables have been established, cheating has arrived in schools. It is seen by many academics as a phenomenon which will grow even further in future (Wilby, 2002). Regarding the pressure teachers are confronted with, they would need resources or other programmes in place to support them and the children in the class instead of tables with numbers saying whether they are a good or bad performing school.

League tables could be also interesting for employers afterwards. This may be considered as another challenge for children who attend a poor performing school. An employer might be interested in to what school the applicant went or from what community he or she is from. The effect could be a divide of the community which many parents and teachers fear.
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Considering the last argument of this paper, one can recognise that league tables affect not only pupils attending a school in a bad way but also teachers, schools and communities are interfered.

Conclusion

In this essay, attempts have been made to analyse the situation of league tables for English secondary schools since their introduction in 1992. As is always the case, research has a number of limitations when it comes to consideration of evaluation of relevant findings. Hence, the present paper discussed and analysed, therefore only, whether league tables boost schools to obtain a better performance, and whether they should be continued. The essay has concentrated on the phenomenon of competition among schools as a positive impact and statistical uncertainty with an inaccurate character as well as enormous pressure that affects both teachers and children as well as schools and communities as a drawback.

In case school league tables are continue to produce, it should only happen with an imperative hint for how to use them. Nevertheless, comparative information about schools can be very reasonable. At the same time, performance indicators are used best when they applied in association with other sources of school information. Finally, the paper does not want to give the impression that league tables totally unnecessary. The comparison of schools and the understanding of how they differ is a very noteworthy activity, since it is the only possible way to see how a school has improved (Goldstein and Spiegelhalter, 1996).

However, as England is the only country in the UK that still publishes league tables, quite a few people who are involved in research or practical matters concerning performance tables now ask whether it is time to follow Northern Ireland and Wales and abandon them.