

PUBLISHING SCHOOL

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS:

SOME LESSONS

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Introduction

During the 1990s, educational performance tables became features of the educational landscape in a number of countries. The intended goals of publishing these tables are to inform parents and students, support school improvement and enhance the accountability of schools. In this article, we explore the use and (negative) effects of the publication of performance tables in the United Kingdom and France.¹ We chose to focus on these countries because they both have considerable experience with the publication of school performance indicators. At the same time, the differences between them in the ways in which schools are governed, in the amount of autonomy they enjoy and in the extent to which parents have choice make them

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fruitful foci for a comparative study. We begin by examining the background and the content of the school performance indicators published in these two countries. Next, we offer a brief description of the problems associated with the publication of educational performance indicators. Finally, we discuss the effects of these indicators on parents and schools.

School-performance indicators in the United Kingdom and France

During the 1980s, the national press in the United Kingdom and in France began publishing what are known, respectively, as 'league tables' and 'palmarès'. These tables rank schools on the basis of raw data, that is, the percentages of pupils who pass the school-leaving examinations at specified levels. In both countries the governments reacted to these publications by issuing their own school performance indicators. These governmental reactions differed, however, in several essential respects.

UNITED KINGDOM

In the United Kingdom, the performance indicators played an important role in the Conservative government's efforts to transform the education system into a market. The government claimed that applying market theories and enhancing choice would encourage schools to perform better and be more responsive to their consumers. In 1992, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) began to publish official school performance tables. While, unlike the unofficial league tables, these did not rank schools, they were also based on raw data—in this case, the unadjusted average achievement scores on national tests and examinations.

In England and Wales, the initial published school performance indicators were based on results from the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination, taken at the end of compulsory schooling (at approximately age 16). To complete the GCSE, students take tests in a range of subjects, for which they are awarded grades from A (highest) to U (lowest). The school performance indicator for each secondary school was the percentage of students achieving five or more C grades, or above. In later years, school performance indicators were also published for other educational levels, based on the percentages receiving a certain grade in a given year on the national curriculum testing regime carried out at ages 7, 11 and 14.

FRANCE

Meanwhile in France, the use of performance indicators was incorporated into the existing hierarchical administrative culture of governmental evaluation and accountability. *Le Monde de l'éducation* [The world of education] published rough passing rates for the *baccalauréat* (France's secondary school-leaving examination, generally taken at age 18) for each *lycée* (an institution where students complete the final

three years of secondary schooling). Liensol & Meuret (1987) responded to this by demonstrating that school rankings based on value-added scores were significantly different from and more instructive than those based on rough scores. From 1989 onward, value-added indicators were sent to *lycées*; since 1991, the Ministry of Education has published them more widely each year. The Ministry of Education report contains the rough success rates for the baccalauréat together with an 'expected success rate' that is crudely calculated as a weighted sum of the national rates for each age and socio-economic group. The same kind of indicators for collèges (institutions where students complete the first three years of secondary schooling) are considered confidential and are not open to the public. These are sent to schools in combination with other indicators that primarily describe student intake and staff characteristics.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK: UNITED KINGDOM AND FRANCE

Given the differences in historical background and political culture between the United Kingdom and France, the legal and institutional frameworks in which the development of public performance indicators is embedded is also different. In the United Kingdom, the right of parents to information has been more firmly entrenched in legislation and regulations since the *Education Reform Act* of 1988 and the *Parents Charter* of 1991. Conversely, in France, those who advocate the publication of performance indicators make reference to the *Loi d'Orientation* of 1989, a law that in fact does not contain any specific provisions on this subject. Indeed, schools in France do not have a specific obligation to provide data for the various performance indicators, although they all do comply, due to political and other governmental pressure. It is also worth noting that the job of gathering and processing the data has not been given to an 'independent' body in France but is carried out by a department of the Ministry of Education.

Problems concerning the publication of school-performance indicators

A scrutiny of the research literature and a discussion with experts in the United Kingdom and France brings to light a number of problems concerning the publication of performance data. These problems can be grouped into three categories: technical-analytical problems, usability problems, and political-ethical and societal problems.

TECHNICAL-ANALYTICAL PROBLEMS

This category of criticism of the publication of school performance indicators focuses on their reflectiveness of school quality:

- Raw, uncontextualised, average student achievement scores, as originally published in the United Kingdom and a number of other countries, tell more

about schools' catchment areas than about the quality of school processes and school performance. However, even when data are adjusted for student background characteristics (e.g. socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender and attainment at prior educational stages), performance indicators are imprecise because of large confidence intervals. For one, these indicators often reflect the performance of a relatively small number of students. Only when performance indicator confidence intervals do not overlap with those of other schools (as is true for 10-20% of all schools), are there grounds for assuming one institution is better or worse than another (Goldstein, 1997). But even in these exceptional cases, there are alternate explanations for school performance levels. The problem of large and overlapping confidence intervals is especially severe when assessing the performance of school departments or divisions, since they are often based on even smaller student numbers than whole-school indicators (Goldstein & Thomas, 1995). Thus, while value-added information is a precondition for comparisons between schools, it is not a sufficient one for knowing the true performance of all schools.

- Performance differences between schools cannot be accurately determined by means of a simple method even when attempting to adjust for all relevant factors. Full adjustment is simply impossible and each statistical estimation incorporates uncertainty. In the words of Rowe (1996) 'all rankings are fallible'. Assigning schools to groups and branding them as 'good', 'average', or 'poor' can have adverse effects for many institutions, especially those falling close to a borderline of arbitrary categories.
- School quality indicators are mainly based on cohort data for those students who entered the school several years earlier. In the meantime, a school may have changed considerably, meaning that the indicators do not provide reliable information on the quality of schools as they are at the time data are collected. These same factors make it even more difficult to project changes in future performance. Performance indicators may therefore be relatively unhelpful for parents interested in selecting schools for their children.
- It is difficult to assess the value added by a given school given fluctuations in the student populations. In areas where there are high levels of student mobility (i.e., dropouts, movement to other schools), so that the final cohort ends up being quite different from the intake cohort, robust value-added indicators are usually not available. In those cases, school performance indicators are only based on those students who have been in school all the time or most of the time. However, information on the students who dropped out of the school system is also clearly relevant in assessing overall quality.
- Schools performing equally well on average, based on performance indicators, may exhibit considerable internal variation. Even in good schools with many high-quality instructors, teacher effectiveness varies (cf. Goldstein & Thomas, 1995; Luyten & Snijders, 1996). A given school may be extremely effective in certain subject areas and far less so in others. Furthermore, there may be considerable variation in the degree of effectiveness for certain student groups with

respect to gender, socio-economic or ethnic backgrounds. Thus, to deal with the many facets of school effectiveness, fine-grained indicators may be called for. Parents may want more specific information, such as how appropriate a given school would be for their child, or how strong a particular subject is (e.g., mathematics or the arts). A single and simple, valid school quality measure does not exist (Goldstein & Thomas, 1995). A convincing picture of a school's quality requires multiple process and output indicators (Schagen & Morrison, 1999), which are not generally provided by published systems.

- Students from privileged socio-economic backgrounds often enter what are considered to be better schools and tend to have high levels of achievement upon enrolment. Thus, value-added adjustments for student intake features in these schools may actually lead to underestimation of their performance.
- In many education systems (including Dutch and French primary schools) there are no baseline assessments that would guarantee the option of comparing students at different schools. Where baseline assessments are conducted, they can lack validity because they do not encompass student performance in a sufficient number of subjects. The use of school-based assessments is not a good resolution to the problem because there is too much room for misconduct on the part of the schools (i.e. preparing students for tests or even fraud). There is also no way to make a real comparison between assessments provided by different schools.
- Whenever there are important differences between the public and private school sectors in terms of regulations, resources, recruitment of personnel and admission of pupils, comparisons between these types of schools can easily lead to unfair treatment of the public sector. To avoid this, all relevant factors must be taken into account.
- Although value-added school performance indicators provide information on the relative performance of schools, they do not indicate the degree to which schools meet certain absolute educational standards (TIMMS, 1999).

USABILITY PROBLEMS

This category relates to the extent to which school performance indicators can be used in various user contexts (i.e. by schools, policy makers, parents and pupils) for well-informed involvement and decision making, school improvement and to enhance accountability. The evidence is against the effectiveness of school performance indicators in keeping parents and students up to date and enabling them to make well-informed choices.

- Accessibility of public school performance publications is not equally distributed across all parents. In the United Kingdom, even after many years of publishing school league tables, a considerable percentage of parents, especially from low socio-economic groups, remain unaware of their existence. Moreover, the indicators are not readily intelligible to all parents, making careful interpretation of already questionable standards even more implausible.

- There is serious doubt regarding their real value in determining the current and future overall quality of a school, the quality of particular aspects of the school and the appropriateness of a school for a given child. For all these reasons, school performance indicators, which are unequally distributed because of the size and nature of educational supply, transportation costs, social factors and cultural differences, have not proven to be effective in providing students and parents with real freedom of choice.
- It is doubtful that the publication of performance indicators actually stimulates schools to improve their functioning. Schools that are already performing well do not need the encouragement these indicators could offer, while the schools most in need of support are more likely to find their publication discouraging, especially from non-value-added systems.
- Schools in need of support are often unable to make constructive use of the information they have been given because reports of performance indicators most often neither define the cause of problems nor outline solutions.
- Finally, it is not always viable for schools to be expected to organize themselves more effectively. To a large degree, what is possible depends on the local context (Hannaway, 1993; Hannaway & Talbert, 1993). Decentralized labour relations (as exist in the United States) or an unbalanced labour market of teachers (e.g. in the Netherlands) can influence whether schools are able to reorganize educational provisions.

POLITICAL-ETHICAL AND SOCIETAL PROBLEMS

A number of political-ethical and societal problems result from the publication of performance indicators:

- Performance indicators are flawed and may be inaccurate. Given the potential for harm to at least some institutions, it would be morally troubling to publish indicators when their accuracy is in question.
- Once data have been collected and compiled, it is paternalistic to then decide—as is done in some countries—that only certain stakeholders (for instance, schools or policy-makers) and not others can have access to them.
- The ‘naming and shaming’ approach, in accordance with which some schools are labeled as ‘failing’ to exert market-like pressures, can have negative consequences for an education system as a whole. Some schools will unavoidably receive lower ranks than others, so some will necessarily fall at the bottom. A ranking system obscures the fact that what matters most is not where schools rank but whether or not they meet the standards considered as important.
- Computing meaningful performance indicators requires spending public money on the building and maintaining of large data banks. In turn, the publication of these ratings is expensive, while the resulting revenues are uncertain.
- The publication of school performance indicators poses in especially stark form the question of the relationship between the parallel goals of evaluation and improvement. Without external pressures exerted by the market and by the

public (perhaps motivated by the availability of performance indicators), schools may be less inclined to make improvements in light of performance evaluations (though some schools do improve in response to confidential performance reviews). On the other hand, however, schools, like other public sector organizations, may react to the publication of performance indicators by focusing their efforts primarily not on the improvement of educational quality but on raising their public performance rankings.

The effects of publication on parents and schools

It is important to note that the consequences of public school performance indicators are not a function of the indicators alone, but also of the interaction between four groups of factors:

- *The nature of the information published*; for instance, raw school performance scores may have a stronger negative impact than value-added data, and publications may differ in the extent to which they define the problem or outline the remedies (global versus detailed information);
- *The way in which the information is fed back to intended users*; for instance, whether they are accompanied by explanations of what the data mean and how they may be used, or whether complicated indicators are used in combination with a 'drop and run' strategy;
- *The degree to which intended users are free to choose*. This includes both the nature of the local school market and the school alternatives available to parents and students when they determine that their schools are not performing well;
- *Actions taken by the system*: the extent to which systems take action to correct poorly performing schools, and the nature of this action.

In this article we shall mainly limit ourselves to the first two groups of factors influencing the impact of school performance indicators on parents and schools.

Parents

Broadly speaking, parents and students have two courses of action open to them if the quality of a public service is found wanting. Using Hirschmann's (1970) terms, parents have:

1. the *exit* option¹—that of looking for an alternative provider who can provide a better service;
 2. the *voice* option—that of appealing directly to the institution providing the service.
- Hirschmann's third category, the loyalty option, would apply when people are satisfied with the quality of the service, or they are especially loyal to a particular provider for reasons such as religion. Hirschmann—who focuses on the ways consumers respond to a deterioration in the quality of production of goods and services—explains that the option to which consumers appeal depends not only on the choices available to them but also on the characteristics of the consumers themselves. The exit and voice options, for instance, are determined by economies of scale, legal

opportunities, spatial barriers, information asymmetry and the income and education of consumers (Paul, 1991).

The research into the responses of parents to the publication of school performance data in the United Kingdom and France has not been thorough enough. Most research has focused on the freedom parents and students have to choose schools, as part of broader studies on increasing school choice that have been conducted in both countries since the early 1980s.

FRANCE

In France, there is currently a limited amount of school choice. In the early 1960s, the *carte scolaire* (literally 'school map') policy took away the right to choose, requiring students to attend specific schools in their districts. The policy was intended to promote better central planning and to counteract geographical differences and disparity in quality between schools. In response to major demonstrations against the socialist government's 1984 plans to abolish the specific status of private schools, experiments with limited school choice were introduced. Parents began to be given the possibility of choosing from several schools within a geographical area. This semi-experimental policy of desectorization has been systematically extended and broadened and currently covers approximately one-half of all secondary schools in France. (The Ministry of Education, however, has been unwilling to provide exact figures.)

A number of French studies (Ballion, 1986, 1989, 1991; Broccolichi & Van Zanten, 1997; Pincon & Pincon-Carlot, 1989) have shown that the behaviour of families in relation to school choice varies according to social class.

People higher on the socio-economic scale have a broader choice of 'good' schools and worthwhile curricula options than the middle (or lower) classes. This is largely a result of geographic location. In Paris, for instance, the highest concentration of very good lycées is in the wealthier fifth and sixth districts. In these kinds of areas, school selection is most often based on school selectivity indicators. School choice in more socially heterogeneous, 'middle class' areas (where there are fewer 'good' schools to choose from) is based on a wider variety of strategies. Some parents try to have their children excepted from the school map, perhaps by choosing unusual subject combinations for their studies, thus enabling them to attend schools outside of their own districts. Some try to make arrangements with school principals and some even resort to fraud, such as using false addresses. Publications dealing with school quality appear to be the most important for this segment of the population.

Survey results show that people in the lowest social classes generally make the least amount of effort to enrol their children in better schools (Ballion, 1986, 1991). This is for obvious reasons. People in this group generally have less time, energy and resources available to them. They are less likely to have the means to live in better neighbourhoods or even to transport their children to better schools farther away. Moreover, they are also less likely to be informed about the quality of schools and the possibilities for choice. Where people in this group do make efforts to avoid

certain schools, the reasons have more to do with student composition and issues such as violence at school rather than educational quality.

THE UNITED KINGDOM

Although the term 'choice' is absent from British education law (Morris, 1995), all reforms since the 1980s stress parental choice. Section 6 of the 1980 Education Act imposes a duty upon every local education authority (LEA) to make arrangements for parents to express their preferences regarding the schools their children attend. Furthermore, an LEA must honour a parental preference except when a school:

- has reached its enrolment capacity (this exception was subsequently refined in 1988 and 1998 to avoid arbitrariness in admission policies);
- is a denominational or charitable institution and the prospective student is not affiliated with the sponsoring organization;
- is selective and the applicant does not meet the selection criteria (about 5% of secondary schools are selective 'grammar schools').

In 1989, the courts ruled that parents cannot be forced to send their child to local schools within particular catchment areas (Woods, Bagley & Glatter, 1998).

Nonetheless, in the United Kingdom, schools generally admit pupils based on social selection in response to market forces in the education sector, of which league tables are a component. In response to these tables, middle-class parents, in particular, work hard to ensure that high-scoring schools admit their children. Of note, performance as measured by examination results appears to be only one of many factors parents consider when choosing schools. While a large proportion of parents find published performance indicators useful, the extent to which a school is 'child-centred' seems to be more important to parents than the extent to which it is focused on academic achievement—as evinced by examination performance data (Woods, Bagley & Glatter, 1998).

Despite the availability of opportunities for choice, many parents, especially among the lower classes, seem unaware of publications that might help them assess school performance (Foxman, 1997). Some researchers (West, Pennel & Noden, 1997, 1998) have proposed various methods to achieve more objective and fair admission procedures with equal school choice opportunities for all pupils and parents.

The ways in which parents choose schools and schools admit pupils in an educational environment with market features tend to reinforce inequalities between schools and between families (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995). An important question is to what extent the government can (and should) use regulation to counteract the negative byproducts of an education system geared to educational consumerism.

Schools

Woods, Bagley & Glatter (1998) present a framework for analysing how schools may respond to changes in the local 'market' (that is, other schools, parents and

pupils) in which they operate. They distinguish the following responses: (a) promotional activities to present the school in the best light possible; (b) environmental scanning to gain better understanding of their own potential position within the 'market'; (c) substantive changes in the curriculum, the mission, the composition of the pupil population (through admission criteria), as well as reorganization and acquisition of new equipment; (d) structural changes in the administration or status of the school; and finally (e) changes in resource management (personnel policy). Similar responses can be expected to the publication of comparative school performance data, especially when existing relationships are affected, for example, if a school in a very competitive environment emerges as significantly better or worse than others. The pressure to respond will, therefore, vary according to the size and nature of the local market.

In addition to market incentives, a great deal also depends on the powers of the LEAs and OFSTED. If they react to the published data or make use of them in some way, schools will be more ready to respond.

FRANCE

Looking at the situation in France, we must point out, first of all, that differences between schools in France are not something new, certainly not in the big cities where for years certain *lycées* have prided themselves for their outstanding reputations and their roles as producers of France's elite. These *lycées* have practised selection for years, both in their admissions policy and in their behaviour toward students throughout the education process. What has changed is that since the 1980s, other schools have adopted strategies to 'regulate' their intake, within the limited opportunities available to them, and to satisfy parents who are increasingly behaving as consumers (Ballion, 1989). The best-known ways of doing so are the establishment of streams or 'elite' classes, offering unusual subjects (e.g. Russian), the closing of unpopular departments, focused examination preparations and the exclusion of 'difficult' pupils. The extent to which these strategies are being encouraged by the publication of performance data on schools is not easy to demonstrate. Nonetheless, it is obvious that the annual publications, including those showing the added value offered by schools, certainly do not do anything to reduce the negative processes described above.

THE UNITED KINGDOM

Research on school responses to performance indicators in the United Kingdom also shows that these are strongly dependent on local market characteristics (e.g. the degree of competitiveness between schools) and on the activities of the various parties (e.g. the LEAs and OFSTED). Observed school responses largely fall into two categories: promotional activities and substantive changes.

In order to 'inform' parents and pupils many schools are spending a good deal of money on promotional activities or marketing (Woods, Bagley & Glatter, 1998; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995), often producing expensive, glossy brochures. Schools

produce this promotional information despite common sense understanding and research results (Ball & Vincent, 1998) demonstrating that the reputations of schools depend more on social networks. Information gained socially is clearly the most valued and most crucial for consumers in their choice making.

Substantive changes made by school systems rarely focus on the curriculum and the primary process. The most important substantive changes are those geared toward influencing pupil intake. As Ball (1999, p. 93) puts it: 'it is not so much what the school can do for its students but what the students can do for their school.' Because disruptive pupils can affect the learning of a large proportion of a class, schools are more inclined to exclude them. According to Gillborn (1996), the graph of permanent exclusions shows a considerable steepening of the gradient of increase in the year the league tables were first published. Other 'improvement' strategies are denying pupils entrance to exams when they are deemed unlikely to achieve high scores. Sometimes students are even denied access to a GCSE-course, told they cannot increase the number of subjects taken, or encouraged to include subjects which are regarded as less difficult (Foxman, 1997). Based on the literature, the most frequently noted effect of league tables on secondary schools is that of targeting those pupils likely to be at the GCSE-grade C/D borderline for a particular subject (Fitz-Gibbon, 1996; Gray, 1996; Ball, 1999). Foxman (1997), however, remarks that it is not clear in how many schools this happens, and to what extent it is at the expense of other pupils.

The other possible school responses mentioned by Woods, Bagley & Glatter (1998), 'environmental scanning', 'structural changes in the administration or status of the school', and 'different personnel policy', were scarcely found if at all. Within the English context of promoting market ideology, it is striking that schools are emphasizing educational performance above all and are paying less attention to child-centredness, the very thing that appears to be more important to parents.

Conclusions

As we have shown, the publication of school performance data raises serious technical-analytical, usability, and political-ethical and societal problems. Those who defend the computation and publication of school performance indicators often argue that they enable parents and students to be better informed about educational institutions and thus help them make knowledgeable choices among schools. Research on how parents and pupils in the United Kingdom and France choose schools does not demonstrate conclusively that the publication of school performance data has a major influence for most parents on the school choices of families, for several reasons:

- A significant proportion of parents do not realize that school performance data are available or cannot readily obtain these data;
- Understanding school performance data requires a degree of training many parents may not possess;
- It is not always easy for parents to use school performance data in ways relevant to the circumstances and needs of their own children;

- Even when parents do understand school performance data, they cannot always make use of these data because alternatives are limited (due to geographical boundaries, limited provision or formal and material constraints);
- Focus is primarily on the exit option while opportunities to use the voice option remain unexploited.

Nonetheless, middle-class and upper-class parents (the ones who buy the newspapers in which school performance data are published) in France and the United Kingdom do use published performance data. These parents (especially middle-class parents living in socially mixed areas where there has traditionally been little diversity of school choice) generally invest more time, energy and resources than lower-class parents in selecting schools for their children. Their investment also extends over a longer period of time: if, for whatever reason, they do not get their first choice of school, they persist longer in trying to get around the situation.

Especially in school systems where there are significant formal and/or material limits to educational provision, the middle-class parents who seem to be the most influenced by school performance indicators may engage in a variety of inappropriate behaviours. They may use false addresses; seek to position their children as interested in unusual subjects (or subject combinations) to increase their chances of admission to higher-rated schools; demand streamed homogeneous classes for their children; and protest against allocations. It is reasonable to expect comparable behaviour on the part of similarly situated parents in other countries. We can be certain, in any case, that middle-class parents will make more use of performance data than lower-class parents and will be more equipped to take advantage of school choice options. We can also be confident that they will be more likely than lower-class parents to demand streaming or tracking in schools.

Even though there are widespread doubts about the usefulness of the published performance indicators currently available, schools do try to find strategies to improve their reputation or position in the rankings. A common strategy is to regulate student intake. Private schools and selective public schools have always been free, in general, to admit students on the basis of their academic abilities. Now, however, previously non-selective public schools are now attempting to increase the proportions of academically capable students they admit, and thus their position in the rankings, by initiating streaming or 'elite' classes. Other possibilities with similar effects include the creation of unusual subject options (as is done in France); the development of focused examination preparation programmes; the concentration of instructional time and resources on 'borderline' pupils, in a kind of academic sorting; and the exclusion of 'difficult' pupils. The short-term effects on performance levels possible through such strategies do not outweigh the more long-term negative consequences. Again, we suspect that parallel phenomena will be evident in other countries in which school performance indicators are published.

The publication of school performance indicators causes a variety of problems. It is unlikely that current performance assessment programmes will contribute positively to the improvement of school performance.

Note

1. This study was commissioned by the Dutch Advisory Council for Education, the most important body advising the Dutch government on educational matters. The publication by a number of newspapers (beginning in 1997) of data on school performance collected in the course of state inspections of primary and secondary schools served as the initial impetus for the study. In the meantime, the Office for Standards in Education has also started publishing so-called school quality cards.

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