

NGA Summer Conference 2017

The Keynote Speaker at the NGA Summer Conference held on June 24th 2017 was Sir Kevan Collins, Chief Executive of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). He was appointed CE in October 2011, having previously been CE of Tower Hamlets.

Sir Kevan began by quoting Philip Larkin: *'Life has a practice of living you if you don't live it'*. He was Chair of Governors at a school 10 minutes from today's venue (Bishopsgate in London) – but as far away as you could get from Bishopsgate and the surrounding financial area as you could imagine: it was in Whitechapel.

He had been a School Leader, a Director of Children's Services and a Governor. Now he headed up a charity with an endowment of £12bn. to spend over 10-15 years. The aim was to improve the lot of children from disadvantaged backgrounds; to find how to motivate them and help them learn and progress. If you wanted to change schools and children's expectations you had to work at it. He shared a slide showing PISA 2015 Science performance by socio-economic background, showing school systems similar to ours (including Canada and the U.S.A.) and showing from wealthiest to poorest. The flattest lines (indicating the same performance irrespective of their background) showed where countries were doing most to create equity and equality: equity equalled success in school achievement. It was also important to note that the strongest correlation in education success was a mother's educational level.

There was a real issue in this country of the 'gap' growing while children were at school. This was a problem for us all too. Of white working class boys, only one third leave school with a good Maths qualification. So what did we say – 'Stay on another two years and we'll try to mend things' ... and what would happen was that they failed again at 18'. Again, employers saw what was designated as an acceptable grade and thus saw lower grades as unacceptable, but in fact they were not. The young people could still achieve in a work situation – and in an apprenticeship. We needed to get this sorted ready for proposed increases in apprenticeships.

The national challenge was to have a robust accountability framework, and this did not happen just by throwing money at it. We needed to look at capacity and the decisions made. There were 428 secondary schools in which the average GCSE point score of FSM pupils exceeded the national average for all pupils. These top performing schools came from across the spectrum of disadvantage. These were all types of schools too: academies, single sex etc. We needed to look at the hard evidence and at all the things in a school that could help to support pupils and improve outcomes. Education could not solve all the problems of disadvantage but it could make a big contribution. We needed to look at the variation between schools; adopt what worked; reject ideologies and sacred cows; and to be more pragmatic. We also had to work with the grain and aspirations of the communities.

In the 'white working class background' something had gone wrong in their view of education. We had to guard against the messages that were put out that only showed part of a picture or drew wrong conclusions from supposed evidence. Sir Kevan used information about the relationship between cancer and foodstuffs to illustrate his point, in which various studies indicated certain foodstuffs as having a negative effect and some others which provided positive effects.. We heard various messages and adopted the one we liked. His argument was that single studies were not to be trusted: you needed to look at all studies and find the pattern across all, and this should be the guide to what was likely to be the truth. There was a huge (commercial) market in the methods that could 'solve the problems'.

Kevan turned to the *Teaching and Learning Toolkit*. Durham University was examining all the research covering improving learning. The larger the agreement ('the larger the pile'), the more confident one could be in the merits of a conclusion or proposal from research. The D.U. study also asked how much it would cost to adopt a proposed solution – for a child, a class, and over what

period of time. Some 1300 pieces of research were examined and 8000-9000 were rejected. Only experiments that included a 'control group' were included in the Toolkit. The findings were converted into months of progress in attainment over a year: if there was not a significant amount of progress then the study was not judged as useful. An example of effectiveness was progress shown from feedback on work by teachers which actually the greatest benefits to students in improving their attainment. Conversely, repeating a year had a negative effect on progress. The next slide listed some of the themes (there were 34 in all) identified in the Toolkit. The Toolkit did not tell schools/teachers what to do but presented evidence to start the conversation about what is happening in hundreds of schools and what might be done in the light of this. Sir Kevan picked on 'Mastery learning' (greater depth learning), which ensured that pupils had secure knowledge on an aspect of a subject before moving on to another aspect. In English schools, in any subject, there were pupils who grasped concepts and knowledge and then a long tail of those who needed to catch up. The best thing was to keep the class/group together and give those with a good grasp the opportunity of deeper, broader learning in that aspect while the others caught up. International tests showed that English pupils' learning was not very deep nor very secure. In other countries this was not the case; there was more security in the depth of knowledge.

Next he looked at the Meta-cognition strand (Growth Mindset, Philosophy for Children) from the 34 themes and ways of learning, and Sir Kevan commented on how home priorities could disadvantage children. The use of "Philosophy for Children" with years 4 and 5 had resulted in two months improved progress for children in their SATs. A larger number of schools would now be involved and if success was shown then there could be real confidence in the results.

EEF was working to fund, develop and evaluate projects that:

- build on existing evidence;
- improve outcomes for FSM pupils;
- generate significant new understanding of 'what works'; and
- can be replicated cost effectively if proven to work.

EEF was asking schools to bring their ideas and it would see if these worked. It was reviewing 137 different projects to see what worked. Significant issues from the lists were: how to get parents involved, especially hard-to-reach parents; the impact of organising things differently; the impact of texting parents on attendance and achievement. This last was successful: teenagers did not readily share what had happened at school and this prompting encouraged parents to ask and to become involved. Parents asking questions led to one month's improvement in attainment. This project was being repeated, this time involving 30,000 children. Conversely, another idea – teaching children to play chess – did not improve their performance in Maths.

Sir Kevan then looked at the improvement of reading. He explained that reading books that suited pupils' reading levels and interest improved reading better than giving them age-appropriate books. There had been some resistance by Heads when they were asked to provide a control group, which would not be involved in the project and thus would be disadvantaged. EEF's answer had been that this would be so only if the project worked. In fact, in one project the control group did better, making more progress!

In England 1 in 8 children could not read by the end of primary education, which impacted on everything they did. In New Zealand it was 1 in 20. In Whitechapel, owing to work done, it was down to 1 in 23. There was a project now in secondary schools to look at how to remedy the problem.

Sir Kevan then looked at generating evidence and applying that evidence in practice. He commented that we needed to reclaim education and teaching from Ministers, who said 'do it like this'.

He ended with the following conclusions:

- *The new focus on evidence will support professional debate – but is not a panacea*

- *Education evidence is more accessible than ever before: our professional obligation is to start from what we know and reject uninformed fads*
- *Adopting an evidence led approach carries new obligations – informing and leading the professional debate*
- *Autonomy should be about freedom at every level to enquire, examine, evaluate and adapt*
- *Enduring question – why is the education sector so weak at spreading and sharing lessons from disciplined and informed innovation?*

Questions:

Qu.1: A comment. I noticed you spoke about innovation and PISA and the suggestion of introducing 'Happiness'. PISA and Happiness don't seem to correlate although Innovation and Happiness do.

KC: A good point. I mean happiness in life not just in academic domain. We're looking at seven other domains of children's development; it's not just related to learning. We're trying to find if it can be measured, to see if it can be improved.

Qu.2: *(Carole Thomson, Oxfordshire):* You touched on Ministers' interference. It seems that they took a superficial look at the Toolkit and saw that TAs were expensive, so decided schools should get rid of them. What interaction does EEF have with Ministers?

KC: Politicians agree with evidence that backs their views. Currently in the Teaching Innovation Fund, a panel is being convened to agree on what changes are needed and matter. Will we win?

No. Will we push? Yes. It takes time but we can make changes. The Secretary of State is better on evidence, having time for it, than other ministers.

Qu.3: I found useful the Key Facts document and Key Questions to use. The NGA could produce a short fact sheet on how our schools compare with others.

KC: We want to do research on governance and what support there is and what the results of support are.

(Our thanks to Judith Bennett OBE who supplied this article. Judith is a governor in Oxfordshire and former Chair of the NGA)