

National Governors' Association 2007 Conference and AGM

The Conference was opened by Judith Bennett, Chair of NGA, who stated that many organisations were beginning to question the value of testing and target setting, therefore Assessment seemed to be an appropriate theme for this year's conference.

Judith then introduced the first key note speaker, Sue Palmer, who is a writer-broadcaster and consultant on the education of young children. She is the author of "Toxic Childhood," which is about the impact of contemporary lifestyles on child development. Sue's talk was focussed on KS1 and KS2 testing in Primary schools, encompassing the developments in assessment over the last thirty five years.

1970s

- It was recognised that the child was born to learn.
- The child was at the centre of the learning process
- There was no formal curriculum (in Primary Schools) at this time, so content and teaching styles were left to individual schools, thus there was a need for a formal curriculum.

1980s

- This was an era of informal teaching, with a style of teaching which could be characterised by The "Real Books" movement. This led to the "Great Debate" on education and, ultimately, to the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988.

1990s

- The decade of the curriculum, when the focus of education moved from the child to the curriculum.

2000s

- The emphasis of Primary education is now on learning to pass tests. Number crunching exercises based on test results, targets and league tables.

The changes outlined have all been at the instigation of politicians, who, themselves, have short term interests.

What should Primary education be about?

- It should be about the three Rs
- It should be about socialisation, including helping children to collaborate and follow rules.
- Developing a love of learning.

Sue Palmer referred to recent research into children's conceptual development that is a commonsense understanding of the world. Research has shown that in 2004 children's development was 2-3 years behind that of the same age children in 1990. She asked if this could be linked to the huge decline in children's outdoor play.

She also lamented the removal of sand and water from KS1 classes, as play such as this underpins the understanding of maths and science.

Pisa success has shown that our Year 6 children are at the top of the league in passing pencil and paper tests but at the bottom of the list in having a love of reading.

When testing was first introduced it was accepted that primary school children would fall broadly between level 3 and level 5, but now politicians insist that all children should reach a minimum of level 4. Teachers are expected "to increase the harvest of Level 4 every year". The stress of KS testing, together with pressures from Ofsted, the LEA and the media, have necessitated teachers teaching "to the test". The Literacy and Numeracy strategies have become straightjackets. Teachers are in a no-win situation because parents complain that their children are not experiencing creative activities but when asked if they would accept the school dropping in the league tables they say 'no'.

We are now in a situation where Primary teaching is objective-based, prescriptive and de-skilling, with children not being given the opportunities through sport, music and creative subjects to bring their hands and minds together. Schools are full of stressed children and teachers. Since children are being introduced to formal education earlier, the programmes of testing and the pressure to teach to the test starts sooner.

What Next?

Individual Learning will not bring about the desired changes in pupil learning as it will be data driven, reductionist and superficial.

The second Key Note speaker was Professor Peter Tymms Director of the Durham University Curriculum Evaluation and Management Centre. Professor Tymms examined the question of whether or not there was an evidence base for assessment.

- He pointed out there were many forms of assessment, official, informal, objective and subjective which are used for a variety of purposes.
- Assessment covers four domains; cognitive, affective, physical and behavioural, all of which are interactive with one another e.g. Is the rise in the number of children suffering from depression linked to the lowering of physical activities in children's lives?
- Testing can be traditional pen and paper tests, observation, individual or group.

Peter Tymms then focussed on KS2 tests

He said there had been massive efforts to raise standards at enormous costs.

The Government had initially issued Ofsted figures showing huge rises in level 4 since 1995. However when the data was collected and sent to the Statistics Commission they said the results were misleading. The improvement in certain areas, such as reading, were illusory. However, there had been a slight improvement in maths.

He then addressed A level results. Due to the lowering of grades there were many more students gaining A grades which meant the major universities were unable to identify the truly able student and were introducing their own entry exams.

He said there was a need for paper and pencil testing and also for the use computer tests which were diagnostic and could be tailored for the individual.

In Ireland they are trialling a new computer diagnostic testing programme and considering not aggregating the results nationally.

Peter Tymms said there was some value in assessment in order to give pupils, parents and teachers an early indication of problems. However, much of the present data produced is misleading and leads to stress for both pupils and teachers. It undermines teachers' judgements as well as leading to a distorted curriculum.

In conclusion Peter Tymms made the following points:

- We need to remove league tables.
- Teachers must be involved in curriculum development.
- Separate test results from judgements.
- Use sampling to test students, rather than mass testing of individuals
- Monitor the monitoring.
- Trial new initiatives before rolling them out.
- Plan for the whole child
- Most importantly: Remove politics from education.

The AGM took place during the afternoon session. This consisted of the business and report on the activities of the NGA during the last year. This was followed by the election of the directors and the presentation of accounts, which were accepted.

The Chief Executive Officer introduced some proposals for changes to subscriptions for the year starting 2008. These proposals are to be put to and discussed at an Extraordinary Meeting to take place on January 26th 2008.