What Parents Really Want

Forty years ago at the inaugural meeting of the association a motion was moved which asked that NAPE membership should be open to parents and carers. That motion was passed unanimously and ever since then we have worked hard to establish the vital role of families in primary education. Progress has been slow but steady and there can be little doubt that parents are now seen as important and that government should seek justification for national policies through reference to them.

Needless to say the present government has claimed parental support for neoliberal policies which are centred upon testing and competition between schools. The market place is seen as the predominant engine for change and the raising of standards. This is questioned very substantially by a recently published research survey undertaken by YouGov. The fieldwork was undertaken in November 2019.

When choosing a primary school for their child do families search for test results to prompt their search? Not so found the survey, "Three quarters are not influenced by government test data when making decisions about children's education. Indeed, SATs are ranked 8th and league tables 10th when it comes to choosing schools". The marketplace is not used by a large majority of families and it must be noted that this astonishing finding comes after decades of advocacy by politicians of both the major parties. In addition to academic capability, "90% of parents want schools to foster confidence and good social skills".

There is also a finding of profound significance to all teachers and heads, "81% rate their children's happiness at school as more important than test results".

SATs, which are such an inviolable element of primary education insisted on by government for twenty nine years, are similarly opposed by a majority of parents. "73% feel that formal tests under exam conditions put too much pressure on their young children" and "88% do not believe that schools should be measured on the basis of formal standardised tests." It will be seen that the government's declared objective when setting the tests - the monitoring of schools' performance - is opposed by a substantial majority of the families served by the schools.

Finally, there is a troubling finding that "30% of parents surveyed whose children took SATs in year 6 say the tests had a negative impact on not just their 10 and 11 year olds but on the wellbeing of their family as a whole".

The overwhelming evidence is that the current primary school system embodying a reliance upon external testing has "a negative effect on both school and family life". So the system is harmful and should be reviewed with the aim of reducing the impact of testing and encouraging a more balanced approach to learning.

What should be the priority in shaping a better future? What do parents really want from the primary school attended by their children? The answer to these questions are crystal clear. Parents want not only learning but that their children should lead happier lives.

Within days of the publication of the YouGov study the Children's Society published its annual report into childhood happiness. The findings of the Good Childhood Report are devastating -- as many as 36 % of children in the UK had low levels of life satisfaction and this was the highest figure of the twenty four European countries surveyed. One of the most illuminating findings was that this high level of unhappiness is due to school pressure and the fear of failure.

So there we have it. The evidence from a major study and the views of parents are at one. What parents really want is for their children to be happier at school. This must be foremost in our minds as we look towards the future.

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