



## **Re-Evaluating Northern Ireland's Educational League Table Culture: The Time is Now**

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The Belfast Telegraph (BT) describes its annual school league tables as a ‘must read.’ They might be better described as something which ‘must be revised.’ They are out of date in their methodology and currently have a deleterious effect on Northern Ireland’s educational culture.

The Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DENI) knows that changes must be made to these sorts of rankings which persist in valuing only a school’s exam results – regardless of that school’s intake or demographic context. DENI made a commitment to institute a better government-endorsed system of evaluating school performance in 2009 when Every School a Good School (ESaGS) argued that the absence of a contextualized, value-added measure of school performance in Northern Ireland is “a weakness in current policy that needs to be addressed” ( DENI, 2009, p. 11). They declare that a “contextual value-added measure” should “be used alongside other performance data in assessing the performance of schools” (p. 27). “More meaningful value-added measures” would “ensure that parents and others receive more useful information about the true contribution of individual schools in helping young people to reach their full potential” (p. 9). The outworking of this decade-old commitment, however, is hard to spot on the current Northern Ireland educational landscape.

In 2014 the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) went looking for just this sort of meaningful comparison and evaluation of schools in their report entitled, ‘OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland, United Kingdom.’ In a subsection headed, ‘Accounting for school context when evaluating performance,’ the report names the BT league tables as a case of particular concern:

The press publishes unofficial school league tables and this accentuates the “market” aspect in post-primary education by influencing how parents choose their child’s school. Newspapers aim to present information on the quality of individual schools in a transparent fashion, typically by showing all schools ranked from “high” to “low” on a particular indicator. The major example found by the OECD review team is the league table published by the Belfast Telegraph, using the government’s benchmark of five GCSEs (including equivalents) including GCSE English and GCSE mathematics at grades A\* to C. When releasing results to the media, the Department of Education includes interpretational caveats.

In the case of the Belfast Telegraph article these are reported, but remain rather abstract to the reader. (Shewbridge, 137)

‘Abstract’ is a mild way of putting it. The OECD report does its best to be fair to the newspaper by recording the editor’s questioning comment as to ‘whether [such league tables are] a real indicator of school quality [while noting] other factors to consider when interpreting the [...] results, including the impact of academic selection by some post-primary schools, other aspects of pupil enrolment, attendance and funding structures. Also, [the paper] states that school inspection reports can give a better indication of a school’s achievements overall’ (152).

All true. The BT does note these considerations. The OECD doesn’t go on to mention, however, the aggressive sales pitch which the Telegraph also delivers on behalf of its own focus on exam results alone. In an ambiguously-titled subheading, then-Education Editor Lindsay Fergus tells readers: *‘Don’t fool yourself about the worth of good grades.’* If you are expecting a call for context-oriented evaluations, you will be disappointed. While acknowledging that ‘there is much debate about the use of school league tables with many, including the Department of Education and some schools, opposed to their publication,’ Fergus goes on to question (in a context-free manner, knocking down a strawman argument), *‘if the results of exams aren’t important, why then are at least five of seven of the schools at the bottom of our league table under threat of closure from the education authorities?’* (Fergus 2013).

Fergus reveals herself here to be crucially and mistakenly unconcerned with context. First, raw exam results do not determine area planning’s decisions about school closures. Second, the briefest of glimpses at context reveals that there is no room in education for such stark, black and white language asserting some absolute, inherent truth value in final exam results. Fergus is wrong when she says, ‘It is right that the Belfast Telegraph produces league tables. They highlight schools that are performing well, those that are average and others which are totally failing pupils.’ Contextual concerns for Fergus are relegated to a list much like the small-print terms and conditions not many of us read:

*Parents need to bear in mind that a school could have a high percentage pass rate but a small number of pupils, some schools use academic selection while others don’t, not all schools offer the same subjects and some schools are catering for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds or with special educational needs.*

That’s a lot of contextual concern for just one sentence. It’s clear where the BT is putting its money: behind the attention-grabbing headline figures rather than the more nuanced reading of these statistics which might get us closer to some real educational truths about students’ actual lives and actual learning.

The OECD is also clear. Northern Ireland needs to ‘further clarify the role of school context in evaluating school performance’ (Shewbridge, 138). It can be argued that this refinement should not simply be left in the hands of journalists trying to sell papers.

England, Scotland and Wales have all made some sort of effort to produce government-endorsed measures to communicate nuanced versions of school performance to parents. In England, ‘Progress 8 and Attainment 8’ are measures used to assess both a value-added dimension of pupil achievement (how far have they come from where they were at the end of

primary school) and a broader range of achievement across the curriculum, rather than just in literacy and numeracy (Department for Education, 2016).

Initiatives in Scotland attempted to revise league tables, as former Scottish Education Minister Brian Wilson writes recently,

The inspectorate [under Wilson’s own leadership] produced “value added” tables which created a very different picture. When socio-economic indicators were fed in to reflect catchment areas, it became clear that some of the “best” schools were seriously underperforming while others far down the league were delivering miracles. I need hardly say this approach was unwelcome in some quarters and little was heard subsequently of “value-added”. It is even more disappointing, 20 years on, to find crude tables still feasted upon as if they proved anything other than the extreme range of economic conditions which exist within our caring, sharing little land (Wilson 2020).

Wales, as well, has broadened their government-endorsed rankings of schools so that they now include ‘pupils’ wellbeing, and the quality of teaching and learning, not just performance such as exam results’ (BBC 2019). In Northern Ireland, six years after that OECD report, and a full decade after the original DE commitment was made, there remains no public, government-endorsed contextual measures in place to assess school performance.

Let’s take a brief moment now to imagine the impact which such measures might have on our educational landscape in Northern Ireland. Below are 6 schools taken from the 2019 BT league table rankings, placed anonymously in their order of success based solely on exam performance (see Table 1).

Table 1.

#### Rank Ordering by Exam Scores Only

1	School A
2	School B
3	School C
4	School D
5	School E
6	School F

To be clear, these six random schools were not ranked one through six in the BT league tables. (Their specific position in that table is not relevant to this analysis, and to reveal that position would identify the schools under discussion.) All we are concerned with here is their relative position within the table: one is higher than two through six, and six is lower than one through five, and so on.

A very basic contextual calculation can be done with the Northern Ireland results, one modelled on the English ‘Attainment 8’ approach. This value-added approach considers the academic attainments of children entering a post-primary school at the end of Key Stage Two in comparison with what they went on to achieve in their GCSEs. The general right to access information held by public bodies allows us to compare the average scores of any year group in any particular school.

The six schools listed in Table 1 are all selective schools, meaning it is possible to average the transfer test scores of children coming in, in terms of knowing the number of As, Bs, Cs and Ds they accepted in the year group for 2013. (The BT used to publish those precise numbers as well, but no longer do, preferring instead to list high and low grades accepted by each school.) By averaging the number of pupils with As, Bs, Cs and Ds coming into a school in 2013 and comparing that average to the average number of As, Bs, Cs and Ds at GCSE in 2018, we can see a rough indicator of levels of progress. As the Attainment 8 documentation in England points out, a negative result does not imply that children did not make progress – just that they may not have progressed at the same average rate as children in another school (Department for Education, 2016).

With this approach, the relative rankings of our six schools change markedly (see Table 2). Second place is now shared by two schools and third place is now shared by three schools. Most interesting, however, is the movement of School F from the bottom of the original scale to the very top of the new scale. It is this singular result that seems to be most significant in terms of possibly changing the conversation during Northern Ireland’s annual league-table season.

Table 2.

New Value-Added League Table Relative Rankings

1	School F (moves up 5 positions, from bottom to top)
2	School B (no change) School D (up two positions)
3	School A (down two positions) School C (no change) School E (down one position)

This striking shift in league table results makes clear that the time is overdue for Northern Ireland to engage seriously with the question of government-endorsed, contextualized and value-added league tables. Hardworking, frustrated teachers and principals who have added value to the lives of previously-under-achieving pupils for years would be grateful.

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