

SCHOOLS NorthEast Summit 10/10/14: Chair's Address

The Big Question: How Can Our Schools Really Make A Difference?

It's great to see a full house here at the home of Geordie dreams this morning. Personally I've not been dreaming in black and white or even red and white this week but in statistics. The best regular briefing to ping my iPhone is, of course, the Schools NorthEast Weekly update, but the second best is Best Evidence In Brief from the Institute of Effective Education at York University – sign up for it today if you haven't already, and I am glad to say that Jonathan Sharples, from that organisation, is with us today. Another guest who I am delighted to welcome also has something to say about research: Laura McNerney, Guardian columnist and Deputy Editor of Academies Week. I looked up her website this week and discovered a fascinating slideshow titled : 5 Big Mistakes When Writing (or Talking) about Research. A very timely warning which I'll come back to in a moment. And there's plenty of research behind 'Cracking the Code', a Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission report on how schools can improve social mobility. The commission is chaired by Alan Milburn who I am delighted to say, is also going to be with us today, for the second time, and I hope he's going to tell us how to crack that code.

I'm afraid I don't have any original research to share with you, except perhaps my forty year study which conclusively proves that school leaders, teachers and students are all consistently happier on a Friday afternoon than a Monday morning. However, I do have a few thoughts about other people's research and statistics, which attempt to answer 'The Big Questions' as our theme for the day calls them.

Of course these big questions can all really be boiled down to the one biggest question for most of us in this room, including me: "How can our schools really make a difference?" I'll

come back to that one, but first let me ask an easier question: how can we ***tell*** that we've made a difference? Well that should be easy, shouldn't it, with Raiseonline, Performance Tables, Data Dashboards and Ofsted all lining up to give us the scores on our doors? Sadly not so easy as you would think.

At this point, I must be sure not to fall foul of any of our guest Laura McInerney's 5 Big Mistakes or she'll slaughter me in her column. These are her mistakes:

1. Failing to include actual research
2. Using research as a hammer to bash people into submission
3. Lack of story
4. Mixing up significance with importance
5. Going on too long

Well, I'll tick off number 3 first of all and tell you a story.

Once upon a time the unusually named Academy A and even more exotic Academy B both have 100 students whose attendance ranged from 90 to 100 percent. That was in 2013. The total attendance of these students (which is also the mean attendance) was exactly the same in both academies at 96%, which was also the median figure (that is, the attendance of the 50th or 51st student ranked in order of attendance, the 'middle student').

However, there were five other students in Academy A in 2013 from troubled families, who did not attend school at all. At the end of 2013 the Principal of Academy A looked at his mean attendance figures and found that his academy's published attendance was 91%. His

concern for these troubled children led him to conclude selflessly that it was in their best interests to join the roll at Academy B, where their pastoral care and welfare support would ensure that they got a much better deal. Unfortunately, when they joined Academy B they remained troubled and didn't attend there either, with the result that Academy B's 2014 attendance dropped from 96% to 91%, even though all the other students' attendance was exactly the same as it had been the year before. Ofsted visited unannounced, found attendance an issue and the rest, including the school going into a category and the Headteacher's resignation, is history.

Of course, in 2014 Academy A's attendance has seen a dramatic rise, from 91% to 96%. They are delighted with their Ofsted report and the Headteacher is on a national advisory panel on improving attendance.

There we are. You never thought you'd hear such a gripping story about statistics, did you? And the moral of the story? Well, one moral is, of course, avoid children from troubled families if you want to show you are making a difference. And the other is that statistics can prove almost anything if you know how to misuse them. The schools aren't real but the statistics are – try it for yourself and see. It's stupid to use the mean average as the performance figure for attendance, because it is distorted so much by non-attending outliers and by the cliff edge of statistically inconvenient 100 percenters. The median is used for all sorts of other published performance statistics. And what was the median attendance in Academy A and Academy B in 2014? A rounded 96% in both schools in both years. Wouldn't that have been a fairer published figure? And at which schools do the non-attenders end up on roll? Come on, you know which ones – the ones that are so popular with all those troubled families of course – yes, yours and mine.

I'm in danger now of failing Laura's second big mistake by failing to include actual research, so let me make amends immediately.

In 2011 the DfE published a research paper called **Early entry to GCSE examinations**. If you have a spare half hour try reading it some time. I'm sorry that's a silly thing to say. Well, I've got all the time in the world, of course, so I read it for you. It says (and I quote):

"In both English and mathematics, early entrants overall perform worse than pupils who do not enter early."

You may well be under the impression that research has proved that assertion beyond all doubt. Not so fast. After that statement there is a table which shows percentages of different grades for those who enter early and those who do not. The only figure it doesn't give is the % of A*-C, which is the figure on which a secondary school's reputation has depended for many years! Perhaps they missed it out because that statistic is almost exactly the same (1 point difference only) between early entrants and non-early entrants (69-70% Maths; 68-69% English) and to include it would have thrown doubt on the key finding of the whole report. I'll read it once more in case you've forgotten:

"In both English and mathematics, early entrants overall perform worse than pupils who do not enter early."

The truth is that this entire spurious research paper is a piece of Jesuitry whose purpose is clearly not to find the truth but to find arguments to support a position which the then Secretary of State had already prejudged, that early entry is a bad idea.

If you think I'm exaggerating just listen to this paragraph from the report:

“The prior attainment of the school seems to be an important factor in the number of early entrants at the school. Lower attaining schools are more likely to have early entrants, and are more likely to have a large proportion of their pupils entering early. Independent schools were least likely to have early entrants.”

So the lower attaining schools make the early entries, but remember that early entries actually gained almost the same percentage of A*- C grades as late entries, so the problem obviously is that those lower attaining schools are learning how not to be lower attaining anymore. Obviously we can't have that. We need to change the rules to restore the natural order which ensures that parents of children at fee-paying schools get the advantage they thought they were paying for.

Unfortunately this kind of second-rate research is widely accepted as evidence and used as a Government hammer to bash us all into submission. That was Laura's second big mistake ticked off. I'm not going to do anything about Mistake Number 4 - **Mixing up significance with importance**, partly because I don't understand what it means, but mainly because I don't want to fail her last Big Mistake: **Going on too long**.

Serious academic research is a valuable partner to serious school leaders, because it tells us what really works and what doesn't. Professor John Hattie for example has had a huge impact on what good schools do to make a difference, and like all the research that is worth bothering with, it is about solid sustainable success, not about berating failure or miracle cures.

And when we throw out the selective statistics, the rubbishy research and the tabloid rhetoric of failure, what are we left with? Something really important, actually, which good

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research says over and over again – that our schools make a difference and that they make a big difference when we have great teachers who inspire and challenge our students and great leaders who create the conditions for great teaching to flourish. I know you hope and expect, like I do, that you are going to be inspired to go back on Monday to lead great teaching even more fervently than you did before.

Can I finish with some important thank-yous. This Summit is surely now the most important education event in the region, and I thank all our guest speakers, our main sponsor Muckle, all our other sponsors, commercial supporters and exhibitors for helping to make it so, but there are two groups of people who are even more important still. That's you and the Schools NorthEast team who have put all this together. That's Chris, Lesley, Leila, Tony and Ellie. And of course our Director Beccy Earnshaw. They've all done a terrific job, so let's give them and yourselves a round of applause.

David Pearmain, Chair, SCHOOLS NorthEast, 10/10/14