

Dig deeper to find the truth of leaver statistics

Data showing high pupil mobility at academies seems damning, but to truly impact on young people's life chances, it's vital to go beyond obvious conclusions

NICK SOAR

MY FATHER walked out of his children's home at 14 years old. A Michelin tyre factory in Stoke-on-Trent came calling and he served 40 years there on shift patterns. His ambition, desire for self-improvement and moral purpose have informed my own. While my academic journey didn't mirror his leaving school at 14, at the time it was a successful pathway for many. I now lead two Harris academies 200 yards from where he was born. Personal stories like my father's are under the skin of the statistics reviewed this month by the Education Datalab "Who's Left" series on school movers (bit.ly/EDwholeff). A complex process takes place when a child and family decide to leave a school, but this gets obliterated when statistics are reviewed without any heed for context.

Like Yeats' beast "slouching towards Bethlehem", the search for truth through research is a pilgrimage: a balance of quantitative and qualitative. As educators, we are in it to rescue children, not hide them. Some of their lives, though, are lives less ordinary. Coverage of Education Datalab's statistics focused overwhelmingly on academies. Pupil mobility was found to be particularly high at nine of the 41 Harris academies and at various other well-known academy trusts. My comments come as someone new to Harris but who has spent the past fortnight with colleagues getting to grips with the data.

Harris is always keen to look closely at the data generated by our work. But, like many, we believe that, while data is vital, it is also at times a blunt tool.

For the debate to have any worth, those seeking to establish themselves as experts must interrogate the data, challenge seemingly obvious conclusions and account for the complexities of people's decision-making when it comes to their children's education. Otherwise, it becomes emotive, not scientific, to speak of "who's left". This may produce easy headlines, but these devalue real issues

affecting life chances.

Pupil mobility is highest by far in London, and all Harris academies are in London. It is more challenging to secure a school roll in deprived areas with naturally high mobility. The locus of factors around intergenerational poverty mean that low attainment is a proxy for disadvantage, and it is here that Harris has flipped the landscape for the better.

In many cases, Harris has taken on schools just at the moment when they were failing and parents have fled to other institutions. Raising expectations for work habits, for scholarship, behaviour and attendance sometimes means parents see the school they once knew change utterly. The rigour of improvement is, sadly, not appreciated by all.

But these changes provide better teaching, along with better outcomes for children. While recent headlines have

inevitably focused on accusations of gaming, the reality in a failing school is that parents vote with their feet.

It is not uncommon, when you take control of a failing school, to find that children who have left have been kept on roll for funding reasons: as well as skewing the data, there are obvious legal and ethical considerations.

Schools are funded based on the October census but the pupils who count towards league tables are taken from a census the January after. If there is any unfair practice that seeks to game the system, it is the loss of Year 11 students in this very short window of time, enabling schools to get the funding without any of the accountability.

In the race to establish whether academies have the most pupil mobility, this separate but wholly more concrete trend in the data has so far been ignored.

The burgeoning world of parental choice

means that when a family decides to remove a child from a school, as a headteacher, there is very little you can do about it. Whether we work in an academy trust or a local authority, all of us have a shared reality: Islington Council recently reported its concerns about "school hopping; where families move their children between schools in different areas to avoid the potential for exclusion or family intervention. In London, this is aided by the close proximity of schools.

Targeted by other providers

The conclusions drawn from the Education Datalab statistics seem also to ignore the fact that the Department for Education has consciously created a market in the 14-16 age range, particularly for pupils who are disengaged with mainstream education. Movement of students is a routine part of the way in which the wider school system now works, with children in Year 9 targeted by the marketing campaigns of other providers.

Here in Croydon, even "outstanding" schools haemorrhage students to the Brit School, with its amazing provision for artistically ambitious children. In Tower Hamlets, where my last school was situated, alternative provision for the 14-plus age range is delivered by the

highly successful City Gateway partnership. Elsewhere, children may leave school at 14 to attend a university technical college.

The crucial area around perceptions of gaming is in the checks and balances for decisions about on-roll status, but these protections do not mean only a few children move school. Far from it. In all these examples, there is often less focus on academic and league table success and more on what the students want to achieve in a profession. But where the child moves on to a quality destination, it is a success for them and the right thing, not a consequence of gaming.

The protection of children's rights is a key issue for us all and deserves the debate that will be prompted by these numbers. But let us conduct such a debate in good faith, and seek to use the data to help ask the right questions about these children's stories, not simply assume the truth is already in our hands. ●



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THE SECRET CEO

No wonder RSCs have so little staying power

ANOTHER DAY, another regional schools commissioner departs their post. The speed at which Sir David Carter's praetorian guard are appointed, do a spell in the role and then move on is something to behold. And it hasn't gone unnoticed that the gamekeeper-turned-poacher manoeuvre is often a well-remunerated one. This time, it's Vicky Beer off to run a multi-academy trust (MAT) in the North West.

But it can't all be just about the lure of an extra few quid. The RSC gig is nothing to write home about: ever-changing priorities and targets escalating, de-escalating, and then re-escalating in importance according to the changing winds of government policy. Then there's the tedium of working with the headteacher advisory boards, a bunch of well-meaning individuals with the collective dynamism of a mouldy sponge, as well as the constant threat of being hauled in front of the Commons Education Select Committee (yawn), another lacklustre group of individuals. Given this is what the job really entails, it's perhaps little surprise that few have the stomach to stick it out.

You can also add to the mix the endless deluge of Freedom of Information requests and, until recently, a general lack of resources or a decent support team. There's not even much prospect of moving up the career ladder either, given that Sir David is not going anywhere anytime soon. Taking all that into account, it adds up to more than just a bit of a ball-ache. And if you're not willing to hang about and notch up the years in the hope of scoring a title and the associated emolument, then there's not much reason to stay.

But some have stayed the course and my long-service awards go to Tim Coulson, Martin Post and Dominic Herrington: a former council director of children's services, grammar school head and civil servant respectively. Sadly, this is not the opening to a bad joke. The eagle-eyed will immediately notice that our three musketeers are

all men. And all three are the South. What is so terrific about the South? We can probably expect revolving door to keep us the foreseeable future, as beckons with more CEO becoming available, as with high-profile education the betting that a might take up reins when Tim this summer knows, the I be better: w trust having advertised a contract for a I think what riches for the new CEO. And we even see an RSC slip in well-shod shoes of Brett V Teach First? Having performed a thankless task of an RSC, of a messianic following (entranced snowflake graduate would be very attractive if



Unless some druid is stripped away, I will stand for Relativist Short Commitment

All of this should serve as call for Sir David Carter. W may have been glad to see of some appointees, now is time to be messing around second-rate leaden-footed. He needs to be talent-spotting hand-picking the very best. That means that the Department of Education has to take a decision and allow him to offer a head salary, then so be it.

But perhaps more fundamental the role itself needs to be attractive. Being a regulator going to be a glamorous career unless some of the mind-numbing drudgery is stripped away, I stand for Relativist Short Co

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