

# AT A CROSSROADS AND WITHOUT A COMPASS: AN OVERVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS AND CHALLENGES FACING SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

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## **Abstract**

This overview of secondary education in England covers aspects of provision including types of schools, recent curriculum changes and assessment to student progress and attainment. It describes the impact of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) and the situation regarding recruitment, career progression and retention in teaching. It draws on government and research documents, besides leading stakeholders, to show why the system is to be fragmented, directionless, underperforming and accentuating inequality. The section about Brazil outlines the challenges and strengths of both education systems and the importance of investing in the teaching profession.

**Keywords:** Secondary education. Underperformance. Public provision. School leadership. Curriculum changes. Assessment. OFSTED. Teaching profession. Crisis. Recruitment. Retention. Discontinuity. National Common Core Curriculum. OECD. Best practice.

## **1. Introduction**

This overview of public secondary education in England begins with a snapshot of how it is performing in relation to other comparable jurisdictions. It then looks at the structure of state education in England, its current secondary curriculum provision, the national system for assessing students, and how the government holds schools accountable. It describes difficulties relating to the recruitment and retention of teachers and school leaders, which are symptomatic of a crisis in morale within the profession. It provides some data showing why there are also growing concerns

about student well-being. It draws on key government and research documents and views of leading stakeholders to show why the present system is widely seen to be fragmented, directionless, underperforming and is deepening rather than alleviating social inequality. The section in reference to Brazil outlines the challenges and strengths of both education systems and the importance of investing in the teaching profession.

## 2. United Kingdom student outcomes compared to those in other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries

England has its own education system distinct from those operating autonomously in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the other three parts of the United Kingdom (UK). With over 84% of the combined population of the UK, England is by far the largest country within the union. Although the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) now identifies variations in outcomes within the four countries, it also provides for 15/16 year-olds for the whole of the United Kingdom.

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**Nearly all pupils in England receive their education in state schools**

Despite a stream of policies intended to raise the performance of students over the past decade which have had a significant impact

on school structures, curriculum provision and assessment methods, outcomes as measured by PISA, except for Science, have remained mostly unchanged since 2006 (OECD, 2016). In the most recent [2015] OECD rankings, the UK came 15<sup>th</sup> in science, 22<sup>nd</sup> in reading and the score for mathematics [492 points] was barely above the OECD average of 490, ranking it at 27<sup>th</sup>, behind Vietnam and on par with Portugal.

The PISA report indicated that one-fifth of 15/16-year-olds in the UK had not reached level 2 in Mathematics [the baseline level of achievement], indicating that they were unable to solve problems “routinely faced by adults in their daily lives” (OECD, 2015, p. 4). Not surprisingly, the publication of these outcomes attracted critical media coverage and widespread debate as to why poorer and emerging economies were outperforming a country that was spending more on education than the OECD average. This is the context for an observation made by Her Majesty’s outgoing Chief Inspector of Schools in his Annual Report for 2015-2016 that, “Our education system is not yet world class” (OFSTED, 2016, p. 1).

## 3. The structure of state education in England

Nearly all pupils in England receive their education in state schools, where tuition and most teaching materials are free; the private sector caters for only 7% of the school age population. The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), the national inspection system, considers that standards are rising in English schools with 90% of primaries and 79% of secondary currently being judged to be either good or outstanding (OFSTED, 2017, p. 7).

Despite this upbeat assessment, the current OFSTED annual report also recognises profound inequalities in outcomes at both socio-economic and regional levels. A detailed analysis of these differences published in the Centre Forum Education in England: Annual Report 2016 concluded:

We find deep-rooted and complex challenges that the system must address if it is going to perform at a world-class standard. Supporting the long-term disadvantaged pupils to catch up with their peers is proving particularly difficult – whether in the North, the South, coastal areas or, indeed, London. The differences in regional performance mean that disadvantaged pupils can fall behind their peers by almost an extra half a year depending on where they go to school (PERERA, 2016, P. 79).

#### **4. Diversity within the system: faith schools, grammar schools and academies**

Although most English schools still follow the National Curriculum, there has been an accelerating diversity within the state sector. 37% of all primaries and 19% of secondary are “faith schools”, and the percentages are increasing. These schools, the majority of which are Catholic or Anglican, are allowed to select their pupils on the basis of religion (LONG; BOLTON, 2018). This accommodation has been largely harmonious since its introduction in the Education Act of 1944. There is, however, a growing worry that fundamentalist, even extremist manifestations of religion, particularly of Islam, are having an impact on the leadership, culture, curriculum and direction of some schools. This was identified as “an area of most concern” by Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools, Amanda Spielman, who in her current annual report wrote of “those who seek to isolate young people from the mainstream, do not prepare them for life in Britain or, worse, actively undermine fundamental British values” (OFSTED, 2017, p. 15). She set out the context in her introduction:

Many parents feel it is important that their children are educated according to their own cultural beliefs and community norms; and with an increasingly diverse population, these norms can now differ considerably. Yet the effective functioning of British society depends on some fundamental shared values as well as a culture of mutual tolerance and respect. We have found an increasing number of conservative religious schools where the legal requirements that set the expectations for shared values and tolerance clash with community expectations. The schools are, therefore, deliberately choosing not to meet these standards (OFSTED, 2017 p. 8).

The vast majority of schools in England do not select students by their ability although their intakes usually reflect the socio-economic profile of the area they serve. Most, however, stream or set their pupils in different subjects on the basis of aptitude. A small number [163] of state secondaries known as “grammar schools” select by ability. Poorer children are under-represented in these schools and, as a recent government research briefing admits, there is no evidence that they deliver

better outcomes than those achieved by children of similar ability in most non-selective schools (BOLTON, 2017).

They are widely criticised by educational researchers and across the political spectrum, including by some members of the ruling Conservative party, for being socially divisive and having a negative impact on the outcomes of other schools in their neighbourhood. Nevertheless, in 2017, at a time of deep cuts to overall school funding, the Government allocated fifty million pounds [R\$ 256,000,000] to enable their expansion. Other types of state-funded institutions include “free” schools, which can be set up by parents, charities, or businesses, and University Technical Colleges for 14 to 19-year-olds, although the numbers involved are currently small.

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**Academies  
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The Government has been vigorously promoting and, in some circumstances, legally enforcing a shift in overall responsibility for schools away from local authorities. These are district or county councils, answerable via elections to their communities, which have administrative, supervisory and resource allocation roles for maintaining the schools in their jurisdiction. Taking their place are state-funded academy chains or multi-academy trusts [MATs], which are independent of any local democratic control and over which financial scrutiny is proving to be problematic (EDUCATION FUNDING AGENCY, 2017). Rarely a week goes by without a scandal breaking over excessive salaries being paid to MAT leaders or over the misappropriation of an academy chain funds<sup>1</sup>.

These changes represent a weakening of local government structures and the fragmentation of accountability streams. Before 2000, there were no academies in England. By 2018, although the majority of primary schools remain under local authority jurisdiction, this is so with less than a third of secondaries. There are two premises which form the basis of the argument in favour of the “academisation process”. Firstly, that removed from local authority control, school leaders would have greater freedom in decision-making. Any putative additional freedoms accrued have been nominal. Leaders of state schools in England, whether or not they are academies, already possess the highest levels of autonomy recorded in the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey [TALIS]. The Government’s analysis of the TALIS survey concluded that it demonstrated “a graphic picture of a high degree of school autonomy in England, both in absolute terms and relative to many other countries” (GREAT BRITAIN, 2014b, p. 41). Secondly, and more importantly, academies have been promoted as a vehicle for raising standards. However, a series of investigations has shown that this has not happened. A recent publication on academies by the Education Committee of the House of Commons, which analysed these findings, noted they demonstrated “a mixed picture” in terms of overall performance. The Committee was concerned that “a significant number of MATs are failing to improve year on year and consistently appear at the bottom of league tables” and concluded, quoting directly from one of the reports it had consulted, “it is quite clear that they are not a silver bullet to raising standards” (GREAT BRITAIN, 2017b, p. 25)

## 5. Leadership and management within schools

A own governing body, composed of at least seven governors, including parents, who are either elected or nominated to the office for fixed-term periods, oversees every school maintained by a local authority in England. Boards of Trustees or Directors oversee academies. In schools with a religious character, the local diocese or faith foundation must appoint an electoral majority of governors or directors. Governing Bodies and Boards of Directors regularly scrutinise the curriculum, the progress, safety and behaviour of students, the annual budget, and arrangements for staffing and the condition of premises of their school. They appoint new headteachers, they set and review annual targets, and they may be involved in pupil admissions and other staffing appointments. While Governing Bodies have strategic oversight, they entrust the day-to-day running of schools to headteachers and their leadership teams. Regulations are clear that whilst governors and directors must hold management teams rigorously to account, they should do this in a spirit of “critical friendship” and without interfering with or intruding on the broad remit of school leaders to get on with their work.

Although the composition of Governing Bodies or Boards of Directors has reduced in size in recent years, the demands on them have steadily increased. The Government expects them to update their skills via regular training, attend evening meetings throughout the year, be conversant with complex systems for measuring student progress and attainment and keep abreast of continuing upheavals to the curriculum. OFSTED inspections monitor and assess their performance and judgments on their effectiveness are graded and made public. Given these pressures on governors, whose role is unpaid and voluntary, it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit new ones. In its most recent extensive survey, the National Governance Association reported that over half of all respondents reported that they were unable to fill vacant governor posts in their schools (NATIONAL GOVERNANCE ASSOCIATION, 2017).

The teaching profession in England has a clear pyramidal trajectory regarding career progression. A secondary school with about a thousand students, for instance, typically has a headteacher, two deputy headteachers and two or three assistant headteachers within a leadership team of five or six people. Middle leader roles usually include responsibility for the quality of teaching and student outcomes within an academic department or the progress and well-being of students within a specific age cohort. When a vacancy arises, a school will usually advertise nationally for the post which has become available and will base any promotion on merit via interview processes where strict rules apply concerning transparency and equality of opportunity. Pay and responsibilities increase as teachers progress through the ranks with salaries over £100,000 [R\$ 500,000] a year now common for secondary headteachers. Regarding their status in society, Varkey GEMS International Teacher Status Index ranked teachers in England in the middle while headteachers in England were ranked first (DOLTON; MARCENARO-GUTIERREZ, 2013).

## 6. The assessment to secondary curriculum and emerging challenges

The most significant change since the Butler Education Act of 1944, which shaped the basis of post-war state education in England, occurred in a five-year period from 1988 to 1992. The three core elements of current provision were the National Curriculum [1988], National Testing [1991] and OFSTED [1992]. This transformation of a system, which for over forty years was lightly regulated to one in which curriculum content, student attainment and the quality of teaching and school leadership would all be held rigorously to account, represented a profound culture shock for many in the profession. Since then successive governments have with increasing rapidity made a series of adaptations to the structure, content and assessment of the state education system. Often abrupt and arrived at with little consultation, these changes have yet to see the benefits obtained in more successful educational jurisdictions, such as those of Finland and the Netherlands, where a broad consensus between political parties and educational professionals has seen a sustained improvement in learning outcomes<sup>2</sup>.

Children in England begin their education around the age of 4, and compulsory state provision continues until they are 18. Sure Start, a government program launched in 1998, has been targeting additional resources to deprived families by providing over four thousand outreach and community development centres offering childcare, early education, health and family support. Despite substantial evidence that this initiative has led to very significant improvements in the progress and well-being of England's most impoverished infants (SAMMONS, 2015) recent funding cuts have led to a quarter of these closing and the remaining ones having to restrict their provision.

Following on from the mixed provision made for infants from birth to 5, known as "Early Years Foundation Stage" the learning trajectory of English school students is divided into five more stages, two of which end with national exams. The following table outlines the current structure:

**Chart 1- Learning trajectory of English school students**

Age	Year	Key Stage [KS]	Assessment
3 to 4	Nursery	Early Years	Introduction from a baseline assessment from 2020.
4 to 5	Reception	Early Years	
		Primary [KS1/2]	
5 to 6	Year 1	Key Stage 1	Phonics screening test
6 to 7	Year 2	Key Stage 1	
7 to 8	Year 3	Key Stage 2	
8 to 9	Year 4	Key Stage 2	
9 to 10	Year 5	Key Stage 2	

10 to 11	Year 6	Key Stage 2	End of KS2 National Tests and teacher assessments in English, Mathematics, and moderated Teacher Assessment in Science. These results are used as the baseline for measuring the progress students have made by the end of KS4.
		Secondary [KS3/4]	Most children transfer from a primary to a secondary school at 11.
11 to 12	Year 7	Key Stage 3	
12 to 13	Year 8	Key Stage 3	
13 to 14	Year 9	Key Stage 3	
14 to 15	Year 10	Key Stage 4	
15 to 16	Year 11	Key Stage 4	National Tests: Most children take GCSEs or other national qualifications.
		Post 16	Some schools have post-16 provision. Many children move on to post-16 colleges.
16 - 18			Young people follow a range of academic or vocational courses.

Source: Created by the author.

The longest of the Key Stages [KS2] lasts four years and transfer to secondary schools takes place when children are aged 11. Assessment at the end of KS2 is based on national tests in English and Mathematics as well as moderated teacher assessments. These results are the baseline for measuring children's academic performance throughout their secondary education. School leadership teams, governing bodies and the Department for Education all closely monitor the progress and attainment not only of individual children but also subsets of pupils identified by their prior attainment, social disadvantage, gender and ethnicity.

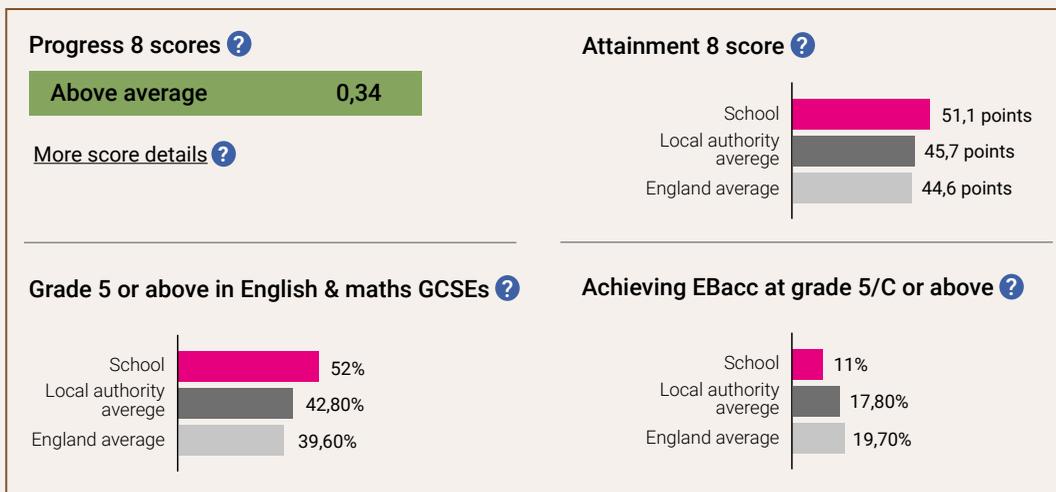
At 16, almost all young people sit the national General Certificate of Secondary Education [GCSE] examination. Reaching a consensus on the fairest and most effective way to assess the progress and attainment of students has long been one of the most contentious aspects of state education in England. The past two years have seen a radical overhaul of a system that had previously benchmarked a minimum of five GCSE passes at the higher grades of A to C including in English and Mathematics as a national standard to, or beyond which, individual students should aspire. The Government also bases the performance of schools on the percentage of their Year 11 cohort achieving or surpassing this benchmark.. The critical importance of achieving at least a C grade, especially in English and Mathematics, led to many schools concentrating their efforts and resources, at the expense of less able or higher achieving children, on a relatively narrow stratum of students who were on the D/C grade borderline. Even more problematic, however, was the transparent unfairness of a system that compared schools in poor areas, which had a significant intake of disadvantaged students with low prior attainment to those in prosperous areas, some of which had an intake based on the academic selection. The inadequacy of this assessment model led to a new system, Progress 8, being introduced in 2016.

The Government intends Progress 8 to be a fairer method of assessing children's progress as well as guaranteeing they all access a broad curriculum. It measures, on the basis of eight GCSE results, how all children are performing in terms of their progress and attainment. The new system replaced the A to G letter grade range by one based on numbers<sup>3</sup>. It gives heavy weighting to English and Mathematics, but it also examines two other specific areas. In one of these, known as the English Baccalaureate, students must sit three exams from a range of subjects comprising sciences, history, geography, foreign languages and computer science. In the other, they sit another three from a list of approved academic, arts or vocational qualifications: in all, there are examinations in eight subjects.

The Government assesses each school on the progress made by all the students in its cohort of 16-year-olds based on a starting point of their end of KS2 test results when they were aged 11. It compares their outcomes to the national average for students with a similar academic starting position. The average Progress 8 score for all students nationally is zero. Each school's Progress 8 score usually falls between -1 or +1. A score of +1 means that on average each student is achieving one grade higher in each qualification than similar students across the country and, by the same measure, a score of -1 means students are underperforming by a grade. A school with a score of +0.5 or higher is performing well above average. The minimum standard acceptable by the government for schools is an overall score of -0.5. Any score below this will trigger intense scrutiny from OFSTED.

The official Government website <<https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk>> reports on a range of progress and attainment indicators on every school in the country. The Image 1 shows how one secondary school in the North West of England performed in 2017.

**Image 1 - Example of how the annual performance of a secondary school is published on the official UK Government website**



Source: Great Britain (2018a).

The first table, a colour-coded Progress 8 score [in this case green, which indicates “above average”] offers a snapshot of how students in the school are progressing within a broader national framework. An Attainment 8 score follows showing student outcomes compared to those locally and nationally. The third graph identifies the percentage of students achieving a Grade 5 or higher in English and Mathematics. The fourth shows the percentage of students achieving the English Baccalaureate [EBacc], that is, those who have higher grades in English, Mathematics, Sciences, Language, and either History or Geography, and the percentage of pupils who were entered for this combination.

Although Progress 8 is a fairer, if more complicated, measure than its predecessor, it is still problematic. According to the Government’s own research, over 80% of parents are not yet even aware of this new form of assessment (PANAYIOTOU et al., 2017, p. 9). There is widespread criticism that it has marginalized subjects such as Music and Art. It does not consider deprivation and so stigmatizes schools that serve disadvantaged children (COUGHLAN, 2018). This is evident in the case of statistical ‘outliers’ – those students who for a range of reasons including disaffection, social exclusion or health issues do not turn up to sit their examinations. Schools in deprived areas often have a higher percentage of such young people. The nil score given to absent students, factored into the overall Progress 8 outcome for these schools, has a distorting impact, which disguises the positive progress achieved by the majority of the students in the cohort (ALLEN, 2017).

Another concern relates to the English Baccalaureate. The Government is encouraging its widest possible uptake, believing it to offer the broadest and most challenging curriculum option. To demonstrate each school’s commitment to this model, it publishes not only the percentage of their students achieving it, but also the percentage that entered for it. If students do not take up the option, the points they accrue reduce significantly. This in turn affects the published Attainment 8 score for the school. Despite the Government’s target of a 90% uptake by students, progress towards this has been slow. In 2016, 40% of pupils entered for the EBacc with only 25% achieving it (LONG; BOLTON 2017).

There is a strong view within and beyond the teaching profession, however, that the EBacc is unsuitable for many students who would benefit from a more technical and skills-based pathway. The House of Commons Briefing Paper on the subject quoted the then Chief Inspector of Schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, who said he could “think of youngsters who would have been better suited to do English, Mathematics and Science and a range of vocational subjects” (LONG; BOLTON, 2017).

The General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders also criticised its “narrow academic focus” as having a restricting effect on the ability of schools to tailor education to individual pupils (LONG; BOLTON, 2017, p. 13). Its stifling impact on alternative curriculum options is starkly demonstrated in the steep decline in the percentage of students taking examinations in Design and

Technology; down from 42% in 2010 to 29% in 2016 (LONG; BOLTON, 2017, p. 23). There is growing concern that England's poor track record with vocational education could cost the country dearly. The national curriculum model is increasingly out of kilter with the rapidly evolving characteristics and needs of a modern economy. Brexit presents an even greater challenge as it has triggered an exodus of skilled workers from Eastern Europe and elsewhere from jobs that will now need to be filled by the indigenous population. The Government has recently published documents on how to strengthen vocational education and increase the dismally low status of vocational qualifications post-16 (TECHNICAL..., 2016). However, at secondary level, provision for vocationally focused courses continues to decline.

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**There is growing concern that England's poor track record with vocational education could cost the country dearly**

Concerns about the weak vocational offer for secondary school students reflect a deeper unease about the current direction and purpose of education in England. In a speech to headteachers in June 2014, Michael Cladingbowl, who was then OFSTED's National Director for Schools, argued that the time had come to revisit the priorities, which had shaped the National Curriculum since its introduction in 1985. He asked what the purpose of education should be and whether it was still essential to retain a prescribed "broad and balanced" curriculum in every school if this was failing to meet the specific needs of individual students. He felt that any substantial national conversation about the curriculum had effectively dried up. The intense focus schools had on their exam results was among the reasons that this wider debate was not taking place (CLADINGBOWL, 2014). The prospect of a serious national conversation that this speech had posited, tantalizing as it may have sounded to the audience, has not been realised. Many of the Department for Education's frequent changes and initiatives, such as additional funding for selective schools, have been politically partisan with little evidence of substantial consultation or efforts to achieve a national consensus.

## **7. OFSTED**

The deep commitment felt by teachers and school leaders to support the progress and achievement of students in their care is, without doubt, a powerful motivator for their constant preoccupation with academic outcomes: another driver, however, is OFSTED's public verdict on their performance.

Other than for consistently high performing schools, which are now rarely visited, OFSTED Inspections are usually held every three or four years. Inspection teams normally spend two days scrutinizing not only leadership, the curriculum, assessment processes, and the attainment, progress and behavior of pupils, but also areas such as site safety, child protection procedures, efforts to prevent radicalization and the promotion of "British values" (GREAT BRITAIN, 2014a; OFSTED, 2018).

Schools are judged as being in one of four categories: 1 is “Outstanding”, 2 is “Good”, 3 is “Requiring Improvement” and 4 is either “Inadequate”, or, if the school’s leadership is perceived to lack the capacity to improve, as being in need of “Special Measures”. Headteachers whose leadership OFSTED deems to require improvement or to be inadequate often find their position becomes very vulnerable and resignations or

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**In terms of class and ethnicity, disadvantaged white boys have been the lowest performing group of students in England**

sackings are not unusual. Over the past decade, in terms of class and ethnicity, disadvantaged white boys have been the lowest performing group of students in England with less than a quarter of them achieving national benchmark standards at the age of 16 (KIRBY; CULLINANE, 2016). Ethnic minority students in England from whatever background all perform better than poor white teenagers. Statistical evidence that schools serving deprived mostly white communities are five times more likely to be deemed failing than those serving affluent areas has increasingly shaken confidence in OFSTED’s methodology (HUTCHINSON, 2016; TIERNEY, 2018) and gained exposure

in the national media (ROBERTS, 2018). However hard school leaders, staff and indeed students may be working in these schools, many feel that neither Progress 8 nor the Inspection service provides a level playing field with the result that recruiting staff and school leaders to work in them has become increasingly difficult (GREAT BRITAIN, 2017d, p. 46-47).

## **8. Recruitment and retention of school leaders and teaching staff**

OFSTED’s claim that it has been a lever for improving standards in schools has to be set against increasing difficulties in retaining and recruiting teachers and school leaders. Secondary teachers in England work significantly longer hours than the average recorded in OECD countries (FOSTER, 2018, p. 33) and numbers leaving the profession are increasing year on year.

The most recent National Audit Office report noted: “The Department for Education cannot demonstrate that its efforts to improve teacher retention and quality are having a positive impact”. Moreover, and cited as an example the nearly 35,000 teachers [over 8% of the qualified workforce] who in 2016 left the profession for reasons other than retirement (GREAT BRITAIN, 2017c). By 2017, 40% of those who had started their teaching career in 2007 had quit (HOUSE OF COMMONS FOSTER, 2018, p. 10).

Despite the high salaries now earned by many English school leaders, Governing Bodies are struggling to make appointments. In its most recent survey, the National Governance Association reported that over a third of over 5,000 correspondents had difficulty attracting good candidates to lead their schools (NATIONAL GOVERNANCE ASSOCIATION, 2017, p. 31). Over a period when pupil numbers have been rising rapidly, the Government has consistently missed its recruitment targets for teacher training, and since 2012, the shortfall of new entrants to the profession has accelerated (FOSTER, 2018, p. 4).

In 2017, in two areas of critical importance concerning investing in the country's future prosperity, only 66% of teacher training places for Information Technology and a dire 33% for Design and Technology were filled (GREAT BRITAIN, 2017a, 2017, p. 6). The Chief Inspector of Schools' Annual Report for 2015/2016 pulled no punches in the warning is issued: "The country is facing serious knowledge and skills gaps that threaten the competitiveness of our economy" (OFSTED, 2016, p. 19).

## **9. A crisis in wellbeing, morale, and dwindling confidence in the system**

Surveys of teachers who remain within the profession consistently indicate very high levels of discontent (NATIONAL EDUCATION SURVEY, 2018). They cited as sources of anxiety excessive workload acknowledged but paid lip service to by the Government<sup>4</sup> intense scrutiny of results, and fear of the next OFSTED inspection.

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), the professional association representing the majority of secondary school leaders in England, is increasingly critical not only of the deterioration in morale within the profession but also of what it sees as the myopic priorities and lack of direction in England's state education system. Its General Secretary, in his annual address for 2018, noted how aware he had become "of the fragmentation, of the splintering of a system". Contrasting the visionary approach to education he had seen in Shanghai that was 'looking boldly to the future' with an English one that had become "narrowed" and "parochial", he described how school leaders were feeling, "constrained, hemmed in, by a mechanistic language of management consultancy with its soulless talk of progress measures, accountability, audits, data drops, and the constant refrain of monitoring. When did we let this happen? When did we stop talking about children, and pedagogy, leadership and joy?" (BARTON, 2018).

Students in England, many of whom are accessing an inappropriate curriculum, and all of whom are under intense pressure to achieve as national examinations become increasingly demanding, are not immune to these stresses (GREAT BRITAIN, 2018b, p. 11). A survey in 2015 of 1,180 headteachers indicated that their most significant cause for concern was the mental health of their students (THE KEY, 2015).

Formal referrals by schools for external specialist mental health support for their pupils have risen by a third in the past three years place (NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO CHILDREN, 2015). However, the parliamentary committee, which has the responsibility of scrutinizing the Government's plan to respond to this crisis, reported that it "lacks any ambition and fails to consider how to prevent child and adolescent mental ill health in the first place" (GREAT BRITAIN, 2018b, p. 6).

Secondary Education in England is beset with problems. In the past 20 years, there have been twelve different Secretaries of State for Education, seven from the Labour Party and five from the Conservative Party. Eight of these have held the office for no

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**The intense regime of monitoring and assessment policed by OFSTED and reinforced at individual school level has led to levels of anxiety among English secondary-age pupils**

more than one or two years, and each has wanted to leave his or her distinctive mark on the state education service. The lack of political consensus between the parties and divergent opinions within them have led to two decades of discontinuity and disruption. The intense regime of monitoring and assessment policed by OFSTED and reinforced at individual school level has led to levels of anxiety among English secondary-age pupils which are far higher than the OECD average (OECD, 2017), and is increasingly placing children at risk of poor mental health. There is a crisis in the profession in terms of recruitment and retention, primarily caused by excessive workload and the stress caused by OFSTED inspections and other forms of monitoring. Despite high pay, vacancies for headship posts attract few candidates.

There are very significant variations, regionally and socio-economically, in the progress and attainment of 16-year-olds, the most poorly served of all being white working-class boys whose outcomes trail behind those of any other group. Sir Michael Wilshaw, who was Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools from 2012 to 2016, was forthright in his judgment televised at a Festival of Education held in June 2018:

It's a mediocre system. We are mediocre, and it's foolish to claim otherwise. Otherwise we'd be much higher up the PISA league table, we would be up with the South Koreans and with the Shanghais and some of the best European nations like Poland for example. So we are mediocre. We're mediocre because we're not doing enough about the long tail of underachievement, which is one of the worst in the OECD, made up mainly of poor children, mainly made up of white British children from low-income backgrounds (WHITTAKER, 2018).

In thousands of schools across England dedicated and gifted teachers led by courageous and selfless leaders are achieving remarkable results. They are inspiring their students, helping them to progress and achieve and in so doing are transforming the lives of children. They do this despite what Toby Greany and Rob Higham, researchers at University College London's Institute of Education, described as the "endless churn of new policies" of successive governments in a system which "as a whole is becoming more fragmented and less equitable" (GREANY; HIGHAM, 2018).

There is no agreed vision for state education in England. There is no roadmap to prepare young people for the huge challenges they will be facing in the future. In his final annual report, Sir Michael Wilshaw wrote, "As a nation, we are at a crossroads. We can intervene to inject the system with the vision, skills and energy it needs, or we can be content with the status quo and the consequences of that failure" (OFSTED, 2016, p. 17). Who should be included in the "we", what purpose and priorities should shape the "intervention" and what values should form the core of this "vision" are questions that lie at the heart of the challenge confronting all the stakeholders in the future direction of secondary education in England.

## 10. Brazil and England: some challenges and strengths of each education system

What insights does a comparison of the secondary education systems of Brazil and England offers? There are many areas where England can demonstrate good practice. OFSTED has judged that the quality of teaching and school leadership is generally good. Within the teaching profession, there are clear routes for career progression and promotion based on merit. School leaders give priority to improving the quality of teaching and support for learning rather than focusing on administrative tasks. Their communities generally hold them in high regard and, by both international and English standards, their salaries are good. The structures and processes which guarantee the safety and protection of children in state schools are highly effective and rigorously subjected to external monitoring.

Additional, if limited, resources are provided for students with special needs or who are disadvantaged, and no child is prevented from moving up with their age cohort because they underachieve. Although in recent years school budgets have been cut back, there had previously been a significant period of investment in school buildings and resources. The “integral day” is standard. Such features are, however, typical of any wealthy European country.

On the other hand, the current English curriculum model is underperforming in relation to its international peers; it is rigid and ill adapted, and there is a crisis in teacher supply and morale. There has been no attempt to develop through consensus any clarity of purpose much less any farsighted vision for state education in England. A succession of education ministers, most of whom have held office briefly, have tinkered with the curriculum, with assessment formats and with structures such as academies, grammar and free schools. Researchers are increasingly demonstrating the negative impact this has had over time on equity and social cohesion.

What, in turn, can England learn from Brazil? There is no doubt the country is beset with a range of challenges including high levels of disaffection, drop-out rates and absenteeism among students, the low status and pay attached to the profession, and a lack of investment in educational infrastructure made worse by the federal government’s cap on spending. A higher percentage of Brazilian affluent and educated families than is the case in England send their children to private schools, which weakens middle-class stakeholdership in the public education system.

Although there have been impressive gains in assessment to state education and increasing levels of literacy and numeracy since the 1980s, on the international scale, Brazil still performs weakly relative to other South American participants in the PISA program. Nevertheless, at a state level, the federal structure of Brazil allows for creative responses to educational challenges, which would not be possible in the highly centralised English system. This has led the relatively poor North Eastern state of Ceará, for example, to progress from its low student attainment scores in 2005 to being among five best performing Brazilian states in 2015 (OECD, 2018a, p. 92)

and so offer a possible route map for other areas of the country, although these opportunities are not always taken up (RAISER, 2018).

At a national level, there has been nothing in England that in comparison to the Brazilian National Education Plan, a coherent, inclusive and imaginative vision for what the country had hoped to provide and achieve for its citizens over a ten-year period from

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**Great teachers and inspirational school leaders are essential in transforming the life chances of young people**

2014. Progress towards meeting its targets has, however, been painfully slow. In 2017, a project to reform secondary education was introduced with the purpose of re-engaging students with a new curriculum offer within which the National Common Core Curriculum with a focus on literacy [Portuguese] and numeracy occupies 60% of school time, the remaining 40% is allocated for students to follow vocational or academic options. This has proven to be a profoundly contentious development, with those arguing that it will provide greater relevance and flexibility

contested by others who believe that it will deepen inequalities within Brazilian society and fail to address the causes that have led to one in four young people not completing their secondary education.

The resilience of many Brazilian school leaders, teachers and students who refuse to allow the constraints and challenges they face every day to be an excuse for underperformance is inspirational. In poorly equipped learning environments and sometimes against extraordinary odds many of them are achieving remarkable outcomes in terms of progress and attainment, particularly in the case of disadvantaged pupils.

In his 2016 Annual Report, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector did not mince his words: "My advice to government now is to worry less about structures and to worry more about capacity. No structure will be effective if the leadership is poor or there are not enough good people in the classroom" (OFSTED, 2016, p. 14).

## **11. Final considerations**

Great teachers and inspirational school leaders are essential in transforming the life chances of young people, particularly the most disaffected and disadvantaged, with all those benefits that follow in terms of social cohesion and economic growth. It all comes down to this: the success or failure of any curriculum model or school organisation depends ultimately on the quality of the workforce.

Brazil and England face some common challenges, even if the reasons and contexts for them are different. The teaching profession is held in such low esteem and is still so poorly paid in Brazil that it faces significant difficulties in recruitment and retention, especially of highly qualified and active practitioners.

In England excessive workload, constant change and oppressive accountability have resulted in unfilled training places, an exodus of younger teachers, and an increase in early retirements and a reluctance to take on school leadership roles.

In this respect, perhaps both countries should be looking elsewhere for inspiration. England and Brazil will improve on their current outcomes for young people by learning from how the world's most successful education systems have placed the status, professional development and well-being of teachers and school leaders at the heart of their plans for the future (OECD, 2018b, p. 136, 146).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Two recent examples are available in <<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/oct/21/collapsing-wakefield-city-academies-trust-asset-stripped-schools-millions-say-furious-parents>> and <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-43155147>>.

<sup>2</sup> Lucy Creehan, in her book 'Cleverlands' [2016], explored in depth the differences between the English education system and the best-performing jurisdictions in terms of PISA rankings.

<sup>3</sup> The new numbered grades range from 1 to 9, the highest grade being a 9. Grade 4 will be a "Pass" and Grade 5 as a "Strong Pass". As this article indicates <<https://www.tes.com/news/gcse-pass-grade-confusion-deepens-ebacc-requires-grade-4-pupils-grade-5-schools>> there remains widespread confusion, even among educationalists, as to what this difference means.

<sup>4</sup> The Department of Education's contribution so far has been to produce a two-sided pamphlet and a poster providing advice, February 24th 2017, the establishment of some working groups and a speech in March 2018 by a minister promising a future 'simpler system of responsibility' <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teacher-workload-poster-and-pamphlet>> <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-teachers-workload/reducing-teachers-workload>>

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