

Performance envy? Leave that to Punch

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I know from my fellow TES columnists that we are supposed to be incisive, amusing and occasionally ironic.

Well, stuff that: I'm in a strop.

Last week saw education's annual post-Christmas pantomime - the publication of the school performance tables. This isn't something I normally get out of my pram about. But this year it seems not only have the lunatics taken over the asylum, they've also put a bloody great fence around it, stuck a flag on top and declared independence.

Remember the "New relationship with Schools"? This was the agreement by which the Government would work with schools for the benefit of young people. Schools would gain freedoms in return for increased accountability. It was meant to be like Richard and Judy - harmonious, trusting, with occasional easily resolved tiffs. Instead it's more like Punch and Judy.

Here's what I mean. Our school - a good comprehensive, according to Ofsted - was set an ambitious target by the local authority and our school improvement partner: we should aim for 70 per cent achieving five A*-C grades. Fair enough. Fischer Family Trust data, which most educationists appear to regard as reliable, estimated that if we excelled we could achieve 72 per cent. In fact, 74 per cent of our pupils gained five or more good GCSEs. So, in September, we celebrated with some sparkling wine, then got back to the business of school life.

Last week, like convicts on parole, the performance league tables were released - including their notorious contextual value added calculations, which are about as fathomable as The Da Vinci Code. We were surprised to learn that - contrary to local authority and Fischer data - our progress from key stages 3 to 4 placed us in the bottom 25 per cent of schools. KS2 to 4 wasn't much better.

I sulked, then took a phone call from the local paper, prepared to

explain how a good school is more than a set of figures, how the data was unreliable, or whatever other argument I could clutch from the expletive- strewn air.

"Congratulations," said the hack, "You've been listed in the top 200 most improved schools." The source? The Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Thankfully most of our parents don't take any interest in league tables. They know that a good school is about relationships, expectations and opportunities. But in other schools the stakes are higher.

Future tables will report science results, modern languages uptake and the proportion of pupils deemed gifted and talented. One day, perhaps, they will also include the number of pupils eating a hot meal each day, those attending after-school clubs or those with Asbos.

Or maybe - and this really would be a new relationship - league tables will be seen for what they are: one tiny, not wholly reliable indicator of something infinitely complex that will never neatly translate into a pecking order of numbers.

Let's call it teaching and learning.