

A success story of a good English school

Warren Smith

(Associate Headteacher of the Folkestone Academy)

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests.

I am very honoured to have been invited to this prestigious conference to tell you the story of our school, the Folkestone Academy. The title that I was given was, '*A success story of a good English school*', and the pertinence of this title will become more apparent as our story unfolds.

And so to the structure that we apply to our story. The general shape of a fairy tale begins with the Exposition, where important contextual information is communicated to the audience. The Rising Action, presents the conflict to the audience. The Climax features the turning point in the story, where the main character makes the significant decision that defines the outcome. Loose ends are tied up in the Falling Action, where inevitably things go wrong. Finally in the *Denouement*, the mystery is solved, and everyone lives happily ever after, except evil-doers who get their comeuppance.

Elements of this are very relevant, but alas, this is not a fairy tale. This is a thriller.

So, to do justice to the thriller genre, we must add the conventions of the unreliable narrator, the *Macguffin*, and the plot twist.

The *unreliable narrator* is a common literary device used in thrillers, and their unreliability stems from the fact that their credibility has been seriously compromised. And further, there are different types of unreliable narrator.

The *Pícaro*: A narrator characterized by exaggeration and bragging.

The Madman: A narrator experiencing signs of severe mental illness, such as paranoia.

The Clown: A narrator who consciously plays with conventions, truth and the audience's expectations.

And finally, the *Naif*: A narrator whose perception is limited through his or her point of view.

I fear, ladies and gentlemen, that you may witness aspects of all of these at some point during this session.

The *Macguffin*, a term popularised by Alfred Hitchcock is the object of desire, and our story is about its pursuit. In a heist thriller, it's the jewels. In a spy thriller, it's the roll of film. The Macguffin doesn't have to be tangible though, and in our story it isn't. The object of our desire is, perhaps rather mundanely, the acknowledgement of a job well done.

As we know, the plot twist is a radical change in the expected direction or outcome of the story. It is a common practice in narration used to keep the interest of an audience, usually surprising them with a revelation. As one might expect, there are different types of plot twist.

Peripeteia, the sudden reversal of the protagonist's fortune, whether for good or ill, that emerges naturally from the character's circumstances, and our story may contain something of this.

Poetic justice, where virtue is ultimately rewarded or vice punished in such a way that the reward or punishment has a logical connection to the deed. I will leave it to your own interpretation as to whether you witness this.

And as mentioned a few moments ago, the unreliable narrator twists the ending by revealing, almost always at the end of the narrative, that he or she has manipulated or fabricated the preceding story, thus forcing the reader to question their prior assumptions about the text. Perhaps this is the way this part of our story might end.

And so, we begin.

Our story takes place in Folkestone, Kent (show map). Located about 70 miles south-east of London, on the south coast, Folkestone is perhaps best recognised as the site of the Channel Tunnel. It was once a prominent Victorian and Edwardian tourist destination, and if you were to walk the streets in certain parts of the town, you would notice great opulence in the architecture. At various times, it has been a cross-channel ferry port, linking the UK to Boulogne in France, but in that regard, it was in the shadow of neighbouring Dover, and services ceased in 2000.

Kent, the county in which Folkestone is located is known as 'The Garden of England,' because of its abundance of arable farms and orchards. The county features England's most significant church in Canterbury Cathedral, and has provided the literacy inspiration for, among others, Chaucer and Charles Dickens. It stretches as far as the outer boroughs of London, and because of its accessibility to the capital, property and land prices are high. Geographical inequality, or at least the perception of geographical inequality, is an issue in all countries. The juxtaposition of the 'haves', and the 'have-nots'. In Britain, it's often spoken of as the 'North-South divide' – the narrative that all of the wealth is in the South, and all poverty is in the North, with the dividing line determined by the location of a motorway service station. Like all generalisations, it is defined by its exceptions. There is significant wealth in the county, but there are also pockets of severe deprivation, and our school serves one of these.

The government publishes data on IDACI child deprivation scores for local areas in England. IDACI (Income Domain Affecting Children Index) is defined as the percentage of children aged 0-15 living in income-deprived households. Families are classed as income-deprived if they are in receipt of income support, income based jobseekers allowance or pension credit, or child tax credit with an income below 60% of the national median before housing costs. The national average IDACI score is 0.21, indicating that 21% of children aged 0-15 are

living in income deprived households. The Academy deprivation indicator is 0.28, significantly above the national average.

As a further measure of deprivation, the government use eligibility for free school meals. The national average is 26.7% of children are eligible. In contrast, 37.8% of the Academy's pupils are eligible.

In addition our school is based in Kent, one of few areas in England which still operates academic selection. The Tripartite System of state-funded education in the 1940s determined the type of education pupils experienced. More able pupils were selected by test to attend grammar schools where they would receive a traditionally academic curriculum. The second tier, also selected through a separate battery of tests attended Technical Schools. The third tier, for those deemed unsuitable for either an academic or technical education, attended a Secondary Modern. When most of England moved towards a comprehensive system in the 1960s and 1970s, Kent remained selective, although three tiers became two with the removal of the technical schools. The situation that prevails is that pupils aged 10 or 11 sit a battery of tests which determine the type of school they will attend, at least until they reach the age of 16. Essentially, this means that Kent has some of the highest performing schools in England, and inevitably, has some of the lowest performing also.

The Academy has 27.9% of pupils with a designated Special Educational Need compared to 12.1% nationally. Additionally, 15.5% of pupils have a profound Special Educational Need compared to 8.1% nationally. In each cohort the average points score on entry is significantly below the national average. The 2010/11 final year cohort had the 16th lowest average points score on entry in the country, and the 2nd lowest % of high attainers on entry in the country. That is to say, the 16th lowest average points score out of almost 4000 secondary schools. The 2011/12 final year cohort had the 67th lowest KS2 APS in the country, and the 13th highest number of low attainers in the country. Comparative data for the 2012/13 cohort has not been released yet, but the entry profile was broadly similar. Clearly, this is the statistical impact of academic selection laid bare.

Since the inception of this system, commentators have noted the prevalence of middle class children in grammar schools, and working class children in Secondary Moderns. Advocates for academic selection argue that grammar schools raise the aspirations of poor, able children, but of course they only do so if they pass the test. This class-driven, academic selection continues unabated. A large proportion of those children who pass the test do so with extra-curricular assistance from private tutors. And who pays? Those families with the means to pay, of course.

But what of the children who fail the test, and at 10 or 11 years of age, are branded failures?

Until 2007, children from East Folkestone who had failed the test went to The Channel School. This educational establishment had undergone many re-branding attempts in the preceding 40 years. Known as Wyndgate Secondary School in the 1970s, it became The Channel High School in the 1980s, and The Channel School in the 1990s. Given the social

and intellectual challenges of its catchment area, it isn't surprising that aspirations were low and academic achievement was poor.

Another key element of a good fairy tale is the juxtaposition between good and evil. As we continue to set the scene for our story, it is necessary to introduce the villain.

OFSTED, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Service and Skills is a non-ministerial government department whose inspectors evaluate a range of provision, from child-minding services to teacher training institutions, and everything else in between, including schools. Although the office has existed since 1984, it was in 1992 that the Conservative government under John Major that extended its responsibilities to inspecting schools.

Having a government department to evaluate educational provision is essential and has undoubtedly led to improved standards, but there is an uneasy relationship between OFSTED and members of the teaching profession. They claim to, "work with providers which are not yet good to promote their improvement, monitoring their progress and sharing with them the best practice we find." Teachers would agree that the inspection experience does enable the government to monitor a school's progress, but would possibly dispute that inspection teams do much to promote improvement and share best practice. The view from the chalk-face (or electronic whiteboard interface) is that the process is heavy on scrutiny, and devoid of development.

So, back to our story, and a reminder of the key characters.

We have a school and community, struggling against poverty, academic selection, terminally low aspirations and a host of other social problems. And we have a newly-formed school inspectorate, beginning to flex its muscles, applying what they believe to be an objective, qualitative assessment rubric, with those judgements given in a subjective way.

It was no surprise to anyone, given these challenges, that in 2002, The Channel School received the lowest grade possible from a school inspection, and was placed in 'Special Measures' – a process led by the local education authority and validated by OFSTED, designed to generate rapid and sustained change. Around the same time, it was also named and shamed in the national newspapers for being amongst the worst 10 schools in England. The school and community were at their lowest ebb.

In fairy tales, when people find themselves in the pit of despair, the knight in shining armour, or alternatively, the fairy godmother appears, to save the day and provide hope for the future. And so it goes in our tale.

The name of our knight in shining armour, and he wouldn't thank me for calling him that, or indeed our fairy godmother, is Roger De Haan.

Although not from the town originally, Roger is passionate about Folkestone. His father, Sidney De Haan created the Saga group of companies in the town, most notable for selling holidays and insurance to the over-50s market. In selling the business in 2004, Roger, a

prominent philanthropist, switched his attention to the regeneration of Folkestone through education and the arts.

Conveniently, at around the same time, private sector involvement in state-funded education was increasing. The Labour Government under Tony Blair had established a new type of school, called Academies in 2000. Academies operated independently of Local Education Authority control but were publicly funded, with some private sponsorship, roughly equivalent to the American charter schools.

Academies were intended to address the problem of entrenched failure within English schools with low academic achievement, or schools situated in communities with few or no academic aspirations. Academies were given some freedom to be creative in dealing with the long-term issues they were trying to solve. Each academy had a private sponsor, an individual or an organisation who intended to bring their experience and business acumen to academies, to help them change the long-term trend of failure in the schools they replaced. Roger assembled his board or trustees and set to work on converting The Channel School to The Folkestone Academy, scheduled to open in September 2007.

It's October 2013, and you'll be aware of my use of a *non-linear narrative* to continue telling our story.

The Fisher Family Trust (FFT), a not-for-profit organisation employed by the Department for Education to manage the national pupil database has released its annual performance data report. As it has been for each of the past three years, it makes pleasant reading for all of us at the Folkestone Academy.

A record 52% of children had reached the Level 2 threshold, including passes in the core subjects of English and Maths. Although this might not appear to reflect success, and indeed as a raw result ranks the academy in the 72nd percentile nationally, it has been achieved with a cohort whose ability on entry was in the 98th percentile. When this context is considered, and the progress value added is calculated, it ranks the Academy's performance in the 7th percentile. When the final layer of analysis is applied, that takes account of the social context of these children, the performance ranks in the 2nd percentile. A school with the 67th weakest intake profile, with many children who had made very little progress throughout the primary phase of education, recorded value added in the top 80 schools in England.

The picture continues. Applying the social context, performance in English ranks in the 2nd percentile also. Performance in Maths is in the 19th percentile. Points scores across all subjects ranks in the 1st percentile nationally – the amongst the top 40 schools in England.

A cause for celebration indeed.

But the success isn't solely related to achievement and progress, although they are critical. Despite a falling birth rate in the district, we remain one of the most over-subscribed schools

in the county, with over 600 applications for 240 places. Parents want to send their children to the Academy because of the firm discipline and exceptionally good pastoral support. Students wear their school uniform perfectly, and with great pride. It hides the fact that the community hasn't really changed, and the kind of social problems one would associate with deprivation, still prevail. They attend well, aware that education is the key to a better life. In the past 4 years, 165 students have left this community to move on to university despite the increasing tuition fees. They are determined to be successful in whatever field they choose. We have our own primary school (K-11), and this year opened our new specific Sixth Form (final 2 years of pre-university education) centre, because with our roll approaching 2000 pupils, we had outgrown the original £40m building. And of course, I received an invitation to speak at this conference.

So, how did that happen? In 6 years, how did one of the country's worst performing schools become one of the highest ranked according to the value it adds to its pupils?

The journey is a critical part of many fairy tales. The quest for whatever the *Macguffin* happens to be; perhaps the hand of a fair maiden, or a golden goose. Inevitably, the journey is both literal and spiritual, with the character discovering as much about themselves en route. The same is true here.

In considering the actions taken, and trying to distil them into something that sounds vaguely profound, I will structure this into 10 elements.

Having vision, values and high expectations; maintaining a strong team culture

A key aspect of our success is the high level of shared, common values and beliefs. Staff share a strong moral commitment to improving opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and a strong belief that they can achieve.

In our school, everyone matters. Every student is known and cared for.

We encourage innovation, but we have a strong evidence-based accountability model. The key driver for all of our staff is impact. It isn't enough for staff to be hard-working and well-intentioned. In a profession such as this, they are assumed. What impact have your actions had? We don't assume every innovation will be successful. The process of learning is a complex one, and the external factors that impact on this process for our pupils are many and varied. We often use the phrase, "there is no silver bullet." There is no single solution.

Small things matter. Our staff are smartly dressed professionals, and we expect the same standards from the pupils. We do not compromise on our uniform code.

Everything is done to the highest possible standard, consistently and relentlessly.

Attracting, recruiting, retaining and developing staff

Successful schools tend to have very stable staffing. Perhaps teachers are reluctant to leave because their teaching is so enjoyable, and there are good opportunities for professional

development. There are clear advantages to keep staff turnover low. Staff become well-versed in the culture and ethos, they are intimate with practices and protocols, and they can build strong relationships with pupils based on trust. That's the theory.

In our case, although we would prefer to keep turnover low, as a new institution that has grown significantly in its first six years, our staffing hasn't stabilised.

The reasons for this are several.

Only 30 staff from the predecessor school were retained, and so it was necessary to recruit significant numbers of new staff to fill those vacancies. There is a general 'wisdom' amongst training colleges, that new teachers should gain experience of different types of school, and so in 2010 and 2011, about 20% of our staff left in order to gain that different experience. At the same time, we continued to grow and new appointments were necessary anyway.

We are also a successful school in challenging circumstances, and this means that when our staff apply for other positions, they are instantly attractive to other employers. We use a phrase – to be good with our students, you have to be very good. This clearly translates to prospective employers during interviews.

There is also the matter of scrutiny and challenge. For some staff, teaching is a vocation, something they were born to do, and they want to make a difference. For others, teaching is a job that they can successfully organise around family life. Because of the challenges that this community presents, we need lots of the former, and fewer of the latter. The level of scrutiny from the leadership group, and the level of challenge that the pupils present, leads to some staff take a view that teaching would be easier elsewhere. They could work less hard for the same money. They're probably right.

So in accepting that turnover is high, although we do hope it will stabilise in the next few years, we must attract good people, and develop our own.

We are discerning in our recruitment and would rather not appoint, than appoint someone we don't think is good enough for our pupils. We cast our net far and wide. We exploit markets where we know there are quality teachers and no jobs. I was in Toronto in April of this year. In the State of Ontario alone, there are 35,000 unemployed teachers. I was in Dublin in May, where there has been a recruitment freeze whilst the Irish government try to balance the books. We frequently don't wait for vacancies to arise, so we can get the pick of high quality new trainees. And we also train our own, through various direct training schemes. If they train with us, they are already steeped in our organisational culture.

We look to develop our staff, and promote where it is deserved. All three of our Vice Principals were promoted internally to these positions. Two of our three Assistant Principals were promoted from our middle leadership team. The heads of the two core faculties, English and Mathematics, both started with us as newly qualified teachers just over six years ago. It isn't necessarily a deliberate policy. It is simply the case that against an external field for these positions, our internal candidates are clearly stronger.

Establishing disciplined learning and consistent staff behaviour

I have spoken at length about the culture of low aspirations that prevailed in our predecessor school. Teaching was poor. Behaviour was poor. Outcomes were poor. Hence, the school deserved its Special Measures judgement.

A new school, a new leadership team, a new building, a new ethos.

In the months prior to opening, without our building which hadn't been completed, and armed only with our values and ethos, we engaged parents and children in large public meetings. The message was clear. We were not prepared to tolerate behaviours that were detrimental to learning. We would not tolerate verbal abuse, to pupils or adults. We would not tolerate violence or bullying. We would not tolerate defiance – children would do what they were told, first time, every time, or there would be a consequence. How severe that consequence would depend on how far the pupil wanted to go.

Our message was clearly attractive to many parents. The predecessor school had 160 places in each year group and about 120 were filled. The new Year 7, or first year would have 240 places, and we managed to fill them, with several on an appeals list.

In September 2007 as the pupils arrived in their brand new uniform, there was the Phony War, lasting about half an hour, before the challenge to the new order began in earnest.

In that first year, there was significant challenge to the new policies. There were almost 1000 incidents that led to a Fixed Term Exclusion from school, ranging from 2 days to 10 days. Over 20 pupils were permanently excluded from school, completing their education in alternative provision. Aggression and threats of violence from parents were not unusual. Banning parents from the Academy site was the inevitable result. These were dark days, and our focus was on establishing a culture for learning, and not necessarily the outcomes.

At the heart of this policy was an extraordinary investment in pastoral care. Although we were a large school, and we're even larger now, all pupils belonged to a house, a smaller community where relationships with parents and carers could be established through a Head of House, a teacher with only half the timetabled commitment of a normal teacher, and a Guidance Manager, a non-teacher with expertise in pastoral care. As a team, they made sure all children were known and supported, and through proactive, rather than reactive strategies, vulnerable pupils avoided potentially volatile situations.

An on-site Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) provided the information on the negative behaviours children and their families were exhibiting in the community, so we could better understand the social context. Specialist staff for anger management, counselling, English as an Additional Language and Autistic Spectrum Disorder, worked in a supportive capacity to enable pupils to self-manage their problems more successfully.

And gradually, the level of challenge abated. The volume of incidents reduced. The culture was established, and the focus could switch to learning.

At the core of this transformation is our policy, and the way it is administered consistently by all members of staff. It is not one person's responsibility to challenge poor behaviour or incorrect uniform. It isn't even the responsibility of a few people. It is the responsibility of everyone. Naturally in a teaching staff of 120, some are more effective than others, and supporting the consistent administration of the policy is high on our list of training needs to visit and revisit. Perhaps unexpectedly, our pupils know the policy intimately, and are aware when they transgress. They also have a very strong sense of justice and some of the more interesting conversations are when they think the policy has been incorrectly applied.

Of course, part of the approach to challenge poor behaviour is to incentivise good behaviour, and we do this particularly well. Students are awarded credit stamps for a range of good works or deeds, and three times a year, these credit balances are converted into prizes, such as tickets to theme parks, or even a new bicycle. As in all good humanistic motivational theory, the 'carrot and stick' approach works.

Improving literacy

Poor literacy skills on entry are a significant barrier to our progress. Over 40% of our pupils arrive in Year 7 functionally illiterate. Many, have reading ages more than 4 years below their chronological age.

We promote the fact that we are a reading school. All pupils in Key Stage 3 (the first two years) have reading books and they read every day. There are reading mentors for those furthest behind. We plan workshops for parents so they can support their children. Literacy is the key to the learning, and because of its importance, literacy recovery shapes the first two years of their secondary education.

Assuring the quality of teaching and learning, and continuing to develop it

Monitoring and evaluation are crucial to assuring the quality of teaching and learning. As all new staff join us, they receive a very clear rubric of our expectations of lessons, what we regard as good practice, and what we regard as less than good. This communication is critical, because once staff are clear as to what is expected, it becomes a simple process of training them to do it, and validating, through observation and work scrutiny, that it is being done.

There is a wide ranging and regular programme of continued professional development, covering all aspects of pedagogy. There are mentoring and 'buddy' relationships to provide further explanation. There is a clear line management structure, with Heads of Faculty responsible for the quality of teaching in their areas. They have a vested interest in good teaching – because it impacts on pupil progress within the faculty, but also because it impacts on the faculty judgement in our own internal monitoring process. If you are a Head of Faculty, and receive the financial enhancement for this position, then everything that happens within that faculty, for better and for worse, is your responsibility.

Regular lesson drop-ins and more formal lesson observations provide middle leaders with a clear idea as to whether training needs are being met and if more support is required. The

success of this is validated through the senior leadership-driven Faculty Review process. As the headteacher, despite the multitude of distractions on a daily basis, I am leading an educational institution and as a result, I observe more lessons than anyone else in the school.

The underlying premise is that pupils should make good progress, in every lesson and over time as validated by quantitative outcomes.

Providing a relevant and attractive curriculum, including enrichment

In response to generations of underachievement we believe that we have a duty to innovate and challenge educational orthodoxies. This is reflected in our curriculum model which aims to engage and enthuse students as well as enabling them to achieve. Our Key Stage 3 Curriculum is a two year programme, heavily focused on literacy, designed to counter the low attainment profile on entry. One teacher is key to the students' learning experiences, taking over half of the curriculum time in Year 7 and about 40% in Year 8. At the end of Year 8 students choose their Key Stage 4 courses, with students aiming to complete vocational elements within two years and more academic courses within three. It is possible that, once in Year 11, students have the flexibility to pursue some Level 3 courses a year early. We strive towards the highest levels of achievement for our student cohorts through a broad, rich and challenging curriculum which is built upon high expectations and offers the very best learning experiences.

Four days a week, all students engage in enrichment programmes, between 1500hrs and 1700 hrs, designed to find their talent. Options range from art to drama, from sport to academics. This is such a priority for us, it is included in all teachers' time allocations. We believe that engagement in education requires a hook, and that hook may not be a conventional curriculum subject – it might be judo, golf or boxing. The reality for many of our children, is that their parents can't afford to enrol them in these activities, or can't or won't commit the time needed to support them in finding their talent. Despite their bravado, many of our pupils suffer cripplingly low self-esteem, and their coping mechanism is attempt to be disruptive. If we endeavour to find their talent, and boost their self-esteem, the focus of the educational process switches to the opportunities it can present, as opposed to the limitations that prevail.

Assessment progress tracking and target setting

One common feature of strategies for raising achievement in all schools is the intelligent use of target setting, progress data and support for students falling behind.

Firstly, although in some educational philosophies, it is seen as preferable to negotiate a target grade with a child, we do not subscribe to that. To negotiate a target with a child who has low self-esteem and moderate aspirations is likely to result in a target which is below their maximum capability. As an alternative, we use statistical probability models to demonstrate to each child the grade that is the most likely outcome if a child with their academic profile was being educated in the top performing institution in the country. The sub-text is that top grades are not just possible, but they carry a high probability if the child is prepared to work hard. The message is powerful and has contributed to our success.

Teachers report on every student every 6 weeks, with the focus being an anticipated grade – the grade they believe the student will achieve at the end of the course. Where that grade falls short of the pupil's or our expectations, an intervention plan is put in place to recover the situation.

The accuracy of the data going into the system is crucial, and over time, this has become increasingly accurate. The grades are triangulated by looking at lessons and pupils' books. We strive for accuracy and reliability.

We find that intimate knowledge of exam board mark schemes is critical, and so we provide bursaries for staff wishing to become examiners for their subjects. Newly qualified staff in particular will arrive with a good degree in their teaching subject, but very little experience of how to assess understanding in others. Being able to teach the skills as well as the knowledge is something departments prioritise so that even new staff can differentiate one grade from another.

The ability to send home a pupil progress report every six weeks is also very powerful in engaging parents. In many English schools even today, the information and reporting regimen is an annual report, and an annual parents' consultation evening. Because of the historical lack of engagement from our community, we report six times a year, hold three Academic Review Days and one subject consultation evening, in order to encourage familiarity with our school, and try and dispel some of the anxieties which might reflect parents' own educational experience as a child.

Inclusion – students as individuals

We have a high regard for the needs, interests and concerns of each individual student. I mentioned earlier about the sophisticated support network that surrounds each child. Adaptations are made to courses and to timetables to facilitate success and minimise failure.

That said, inclusion does not mean complete, indefinite and unquestionable tolerance. Because of the destructive nature of a few children, and their ongoing unwillingness to conform, there comes a time when an alternative must be found. We have our own alternative education centre with vocational programmes and basic skills, but we also, in the most extreme cases, have access to specialist EBD (Emotional and Behavioural Difficulty) provision, and Pupil Referral Units.

Sometimes, inclusion for the vast majority means taking a tough decision with a small minority. Mainstream education is not for everyone, but the quality of the 'alternative' determines whether you are inclusive or exclusive.

Building relationships with students, parents, community

The past 6 years have not been easy in terms of normalising our expectations, but through rehearsing our expectations every day, repeating the same consistent message to staff, pupils and parents, we have made progress. Parental feedback is traditionally very strong.

There is still some resistance from the community, but because the positive impact of the changes are evident in our academic performance and in the students' conduct, this cynicism is dissipating. The battle is not won, but the critical mass is now with us, and not against us. They may not agree with everything we do, but they understand that we have their child's best interests at heart.

Partnering another school facing difficulties

A measure of our success is reflected in the request that our management team provide support for another Academy facing challenging circumstances.

And so the process begins again. We have not arrived at this point by picking a book of school management solutions off the shelf. Members of our team are spending time at this school this term, appraising the similarities and differences, and determining a long term plan to address its problems.

The vision is set. Excellence, for everyone. Context is important, but it is not a barrier. High expectations of conduct, from staff and pupils. Do not settle for anything less than their best.

So our manual for school improvement has 10 chapters. This is the success story of a good English school, or is it?

You'll recall, that at the beginning, I told you this wasn't a fairy tale, but instead, it was a thriller. You'll also recall that you should await the plot twist, delivered by the unreliable narrator. And here it is.

Armed with the evidence, quantitative and qualitative, about context and performance, OFSTED, our fairy tale villains, visited our school in June 2013. And they found that despite the context of this community, despite the positive learning environment, despite the outcomes which exceed significantly anything the national pupils database would have predicted for these students, our school Requires Improvement.

To my international colleagues, these two words alone are pretty innocuous and probably true. What school leader would be arrogant enough to assume no further improvements were possible? None, in my experience.

However, to anyone from the United Kingdom, this is Requires Improvement with a capital R and a capital I. It is the grade on OFSTED's assessment rubric that sits below Outstanding and Good, and above Inadequate (which is further divided into Notice to Improve and Special Measures). It's a grade 3 out of 4. In short, it means not good enough.

In short, the twist is, despite what I believe to be compelling evidence to the contrary, we are not Good. I am here under false pretences.

It raises some interesting questions.

How can a school whose value added to pupils' academic performance is ranked in the 2nd percentile, not be Good? How can there be such disconnect between irrefutable, quantitative performance, and the way in which the quality of a school is perceived? Why is a set of criteria, designed to be applied objectively, but interpreted with the subjective whims of each individual inspector, seen as a more reliable method of assessing whether a school is performing well? If the assessment rubric contained within the framework is robust, why is it necessary to rewrite it so frequently?

Within 30 miles of our school, the inconsistencies of the relationship between ability profile, achievement, progress and OFSTED judgements are startling.

Folkestone Academy: 52% of pupils aged 16 achieved the Level 2 threshold, the critical measure for gauging school performance. Ability profile on entry is 67th weakest in the country out of 4000 secondary schools. OFSTED assessment: Requires Improvement (3)

School A: 21% of pupils aged 16 achieved the Level 2 threshold, the lowest in the county this year. Ability profile is weak, but stronger than Folkestone Academy. OFSTED assessment: Outstanding (1)

School B: 52% of pupils aged 16 achieved the Level 2 threshold. Ability profile is broadly average, so significantly stronger than the Folkestone Academy. OFSTED assessment: Outstanding (1)

School C: 42% of pupils aged 16 achieved the Level 2 threshold. Ability profile is weak, but stronger than Folkestone Academy. However, the school is experiencing a rapidly falling roll as parents have lost confidence in, and are openly critical of the school leadership. OFSTED assessment: Good (2)

As I think these brief pen-portraits demonstrate, our system for reliably evaluating the quality of schools is not fit for purpose.

However, despite what you might think, I am supportive about the external evaluation of schools, by OFSTED or whoever might follow them. I believe that the inspection regime and the publication of school performance tables, has had a significant impact on challenging all schools to enable their pupils to achieve their best. They have successfully cured the malaise that schools, such as the one that preceded mine, were victims of. They have forced school leaders to leave no stone unturned in maximising every child's potential. This accountability is a forceful agent for change.

But it is the assessment rubric that causes the greatest despair. The nonsense that you can outperform external statistical predictions by 23% points, and still be told that it's not good enough, because the grade rested on a subjective interpretation of a cryptic statement, as opposed to hard, irrefutable data.

Our conference began with two questions. Who needs league tables? What indicates that a school is good?

In response to the first, I firmly believe that performance tables have made a significant contribution to raising standards. In the UK, school admissions is a competitive market, with funding devolved based on pupil numbers. Parents generally have a choice of where to send their children. Low numbers means a reduction in funding, potentially staff redundancies, and fewer subject choices for pupils. This public accountability provides parents with critical information that informs their choice.

However, there are inconsistencies in the tables, which, in the minds of some, compromise their efficacy. The provision of the qualifications is also a competitive market, with large international publishing conglomerates involved in providing attractive qualifications for schools to choose. Inevitably, in the context of public accountability, the critical factor that informs a school's choice of qualification is probably not academic rigour. In this environment, the more challenging a qualification, the less popular it is likely to be, and qualifications are marketed on the basis of their accessibility. It's what our government rather dismissively call, the 'race to the bottom.'

League tables, and the public accountability that ensues, are effective, but only if the provision and administration of qualifications is tightly controlled. No easy options.

Another effect of league tables and the competitive market on admissions, is that inter-school relationships suffer. By virtue of everyone being benchmarked against the 'best', and measured publicly against their competitors, it stands to reason that schools will make decisions that give them a competitive advantage. Local Education Authorities organise headteacher forums to discuss the educational priorities for their district. In this tense educational context, genuine collaboration is rare. For the most part, this isn't a problem, but very occasionally, for example with pupils with extreme needs that exhibit challenging behaviour, schools are reluctant to admit them because of the impact their presence might have on other pupils, and further down the line, on the school's overall performance. This is the darker side of public accountability.

Accepting the positives of accountability through league tables, it is important to reflect on what they should contain. Internationally, different education systems will have their own critical outcomes that determine access to higher education or training, and these will be long established, and I wouldn't be using this speech to advocate any move towards our own much-maligned system in the UK. However, whatever the outcome, the reported achievement should comprise two elements – attainment and progress. By attainment I mean the final raw grade or points that are awarded for a particular level of performance. Inevitably, tables that focus solely on attainment will reflect well on schools that have high achieving pupils, perhaps from middle class households. But what of schools that serve disadvantaged communities? Do they really need a league table to know their pupils are not as able? This is why the measurement of progress is equally critical. By progress, I mean the distance travelled from when the pupil entered the school, to when they sit their final exams. It is only through measuring progress that a system can differentiate between a complacent school that serves an affluent community, and a high-performing school that serves a poor community.

So, how can progress be effectively measured? In the UK, the national pupil database holds a wide range of information that is critical to progress measurement. At a basic level, we look at the test scores for a child aged 11, and from there look at their outcomes aged 16. This is the premise of value added. There is also the measurement of contextual value added, which as well as looking at the difference in scores between the ages of 11 and 16, considers the gender, ethnicity, month of birth and deprivation index of that child, and applies a probability model to inflate or reduce the expected score at 16. In this model, a summer-born, Afro-Caribbean boy from a poor household would be expected to achieve less than an autumn-born, White girl from a middle income household.

Education policy makers in the UK had gone cold on the importance of contextual information shaping expectations. Their argument, and it is logical, is that the child's context has already played a significant part in their academic performance at 11. To use it to moderate their achievements at 16 is double-accounting of sorts. Only recently, there has been something of a U-turn, and the appreciation of a pupil's and a school's context is fashionable again. The counter-argument that it is foolish to assume that a child who has made very little progress to the age of 11, will make the same, linear amount of progress expected of a high achieving child, has been accepted.

As for how to determine a good school, if the quantitative method of assessing the progress of pupils is robust, then you have the key driver. After all, isn't the primary purpose of schools to maximise pupils' potential? Other elements are important, but in my view, they all lead into this measure, either directly, or indirectly.

Pupils' attendance at school is another reliable, quantitative element which could be used to assess the quality of education provision, but on its own it proves nothing. Attendance without progress means either the teaching or the learning wasn't effective.

In the UK, the quality of teaching is assessed through a 2 day inspection visit and bears no relation to the quantitative outcomes. Their view is that in assessing the quality of teaching over time, this snapshot of observations every 3 years is a more reliable indicator than indisputable, quantitative outcomes. It is not logical that progress is good but teaching is poor. Equally, teaching cannot be good if progress is poor.

Pupils' behaviour and safety at school is a further measure, but again it links back to pupil progress. Pupils simply do not make good progress in a disruptive learning environment.

I'm not sure whether it is beyond my remit to provide advice to the Estonian Ministry for Education and Research, as to how to determine whether a school is good, but I will summarise my thoughts thus.

The body that evaluates the quality of schools should be the agency that oversees their improvement. This is too important for free market consultants. The method of assessment should be quantitative, and not qualitative. You must take account of, but not make excuse for, schools in challenging circumstances. If you don't, there will be resistance and the most vulnerable groups will continue to suffer. The cycle of deprivation will never be broken.

Embrace these groups in the knowledge that whatever has gone before, you can make good progress with them in the future. Judgements about schools must be objective and not subjective. Any hint of inconsistency leads to school leaders losing faith. There should be a clear rubric that determines the quality of a school, and change to this should not happen readily. Do not pursue populist, whimsical policies. Education is the key to any nations' future, and it needs stability and continuity.

Like every school, my school requires improvement, but that's with a little r, and a little i.

Thank you for listening.