



Educational excellence is here – let's learn from it.

Anne Nelson

All political parties pledge a commitment to excellence in education. Of course it is differently manifested according to which party is speaking. However they have excellence right under their noses in the maintained sector's nursery schools, but not one of them seems to notice it. There is an amazing opportunity waiting to be seized for analysing and documenting this outstanding practice.

Soon after the Labour party came to power in 1997 the government began to notice by establishing a new programme of Early Excellence Centres. These centres were the flagships of quality. The first eight centres were inspected by HMI from several departments including Education, Social Services, Health and Adult Education. They were *anointed* and later funding followed to allow the centres to take a role raising the quality of all services for the under fives.

At the heart of the Early Excellence programme were nursery schools. As the Early Excellence programme developed into integrated Children's Centres, nursery schools have continued to carry the banner of quality. We know that they are well ahead of the private, voluntary and independent sector in terms of quality. They do, of course, have highly qualified staff compared to the settings who are required to have only 50% of the staff with any qualification.

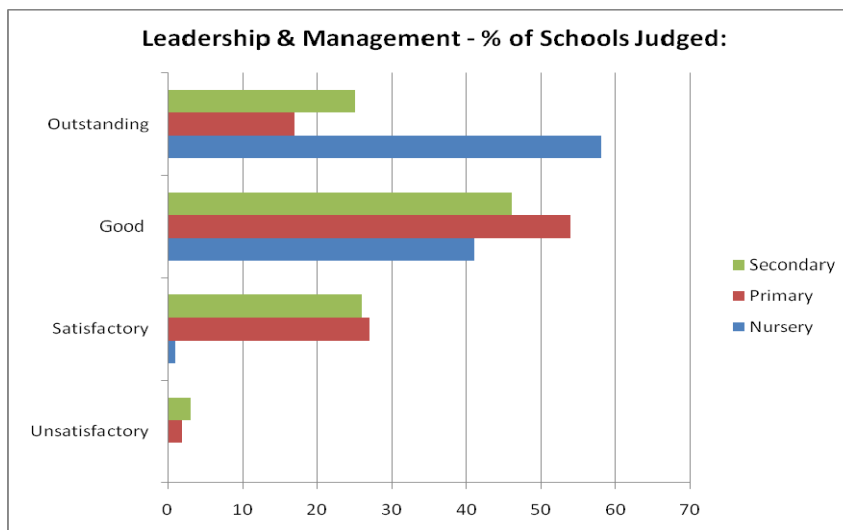
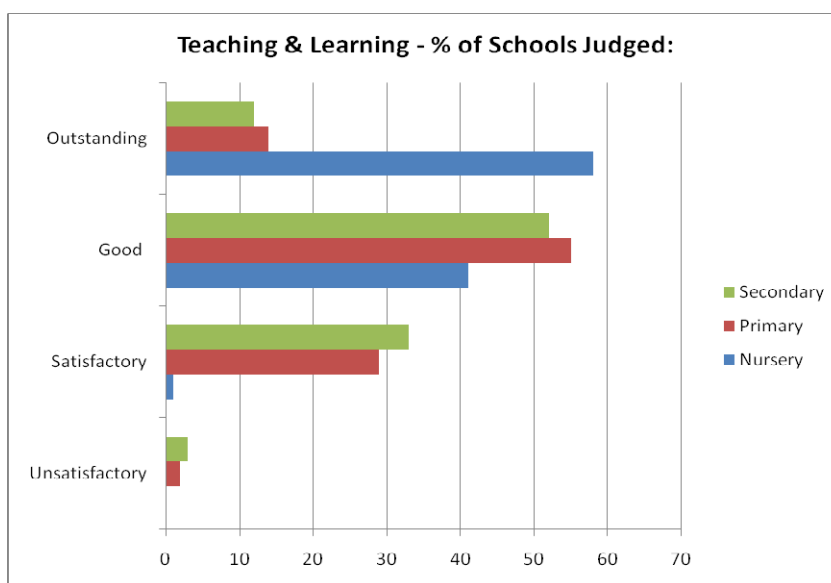
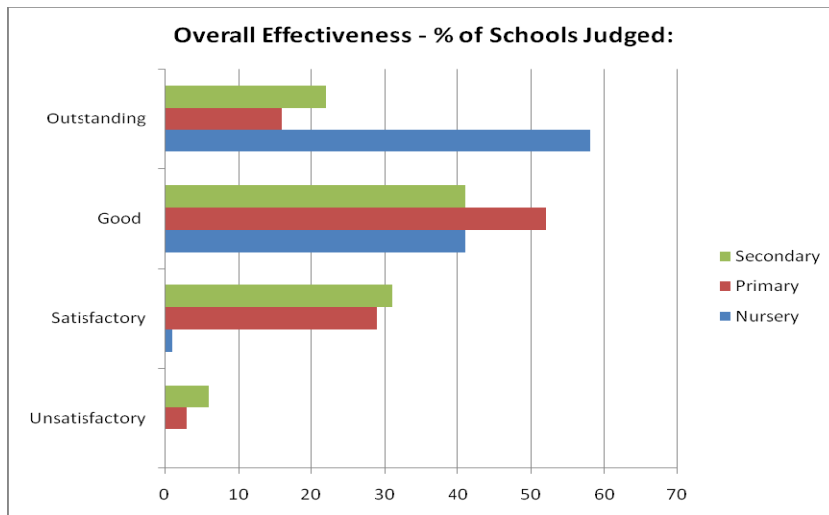
In the following years the government expanded the opportunities for four year-olds, three-year-olds and latterly two-year-olds. At first the emphasis was on the quantity of provision, and later came the realisation that just increasing provision was not enough to make a real difference to children's lives.

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project states that:

"Settings which have staff with higher qualifications, especially with good proportion of trained teachers on the staff, show higher quality and their children make more progress."
"Integrated centres (these are centres that fully combine education with care) and nursery schools tend to promote better intellectual outcomes for children."

But how do nursery schools compare with their counterparts in primary and secondary schools? I have been monitoring the outcomes of Ofsted inspections of nursery schools for several years and seeing increasing numbers of outstanding outcomes. In the Ofsted annual report from HMCI 99% of nursery schools inspected between September 2008 to August 2009 were good or outstanding in overall effectiveness, with 58% outstanding .

The following tables show that these statistics are consistent across teaching and learning, and leadership and management.



Extracts from Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2008/09

However you look at the statistics they are stunning. All schools are inspected under the same framework by the same type of inspectors. So it is an even playing field. Ofsted makes light of these outcomes, hardly mentioning them except in the context of all schools. Why haven't they produced a booklet about *10 outstanding nursery schools* as they have done about the rest of the sector? This is where HMI used to be at their best, promoting best practice, before they became more focussed on inspection data.

I do not merely rely on Ofsted for this view of quality. In my national work, and latterly as a freelance educational consultant, I have visited many schools and settings. My experiences across the country would concur with Ofsted's judgement on quality.

So where are we now? Not only are these the schools not being noticed, some are threatened with closure because of funding proposals. Whoever said that quality was cheap?

We are entering a new political period where the future of state education is unclear let alone the future of nursery schools. If the government and Ofsted do not choose research into this outstanding quality someone needs to document it so that other sectors can learn from the successes for the sake of generations of children to come.

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