

The Data Landscape Is Changing – Are we ready for it?

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The data landscape for UK education is on the cusp of a change.

The Data Exchange will finally provide a standardised, properly managed facility to exchange data between school and government, and local authority and government. Initially replacing the very antiquated, manual approach to returning census data to the Department for Education, as well as the process-intensive and often unreliable Common Transfer File method to exchange student records between old and new school, Data Exchange will be providing the base to enable any exchange of data between potentially any 'end point'.

Data Exchange, and the data warehouse sitting behind this (part of the DfE Digital Strategy 2012), essentially removes any need for census as we know it today, as well as the periodic update of centralised data with a more frequent 'flow' of information from each school into central government, allowing for the potential more timely allocation of resources, analysis and intervention. Not just from the DfE, but by trusts, local authorities and even schools themselves, and the future of data sharing between systems has never looked brighter.

This is the preamble for a promotional article I recently wrote for my day job at ZiNET Data Solutions (The rest explains how, because this is coming, suppliers need to be ready, and if they are not, then experts with the ZiNET Connect product can help!)

What I have pondered however is, is our country and sector ready for such a dramatic shift. It should not be misunderstood, the concepts the Data Exchange is offering are extraordinary and I fully support it. My scepticism is not in the technology or the product set, the former I have been working with essentially for years, the later I had the fortune of consulting with the DfE for a few months this year and gained a unique insight to the project. My scepticism lies with those that the end result of this project, the essentially free flowing (yet properly controlled) stream of data to the DfE (as opposed to the termly census debacle we have all faced in our careers), will impact most: School staff, and conversely by proxy, students.

Schools are currently masters of their own data. Forgetting any legal ramifications under the Data Protection Act for just a moment, the level of protection of school data from being shared even legally and appropriately with anyone else, is usually reserved for one's own child. And often not for a positive reason. Too often in current and previous occupations have I heard stories about not allowing certain data areas or past records to be even opened up to parents, students or others. Why? Because the information contained within is not appropriate. Because teacher x has written a very personal and derogatory behaviour record for little Johnny Rotten. Because actually the school has not entered some compulsory or legislative information about the new intake yet (often waiting for the week before the census is due to do that little chore).

Another angle for this staunch protectionism comes with the assessment type data, particularly in its raw format, before any appropriate refinement has been done to make it more visually appealing (Note that I am not suggesting that at any time I have witnessed any untoward data manipulation going on).

There are many legal, appropriate and down-right common sense reasons why some data objects should not be shared as often or as widely as others, particularly when the protection of child wellbeing is of importance. The complexities that this area throws up are complex and politically sensitive. For instance (and a snapshot of a conversation I was having with Matt Smith recently), a school receives a change of address from a student, or parent. Bypassing the internal processes to check this within the school for the moment, in a particular case, the social care department at the local authority will be informed, but may wish to check on this for themselves and certainly would not wish to merely accept this new information as fact. I will not even pretend to understand the internal processes and hardships surrounding social care data management!

Data Exchange will be taking into account the apparent 'mastery of data'; what is the master data source. In nearly all cases for the foreseeable future, this will be the system at the establishment physically closest to the data owner; the MIS, the student. In a possible future, the actual master data source might be a single central record at the DfE, but let's not dwell on that possibility right now.

Data Exchange will also be moving data (one way to begin with) on a more regular bases, meaning that the master data source; the school MIS and its data, needs to be in a more tip top condition from the start and throughout. Schools and school staff also need to be aware of this fact with any interaction they have with that data.

This should, SHOULD, not be an issue, if a school is using data and data systems appropriately. The biggest fear amongst schools is with their historical data, sometimes dating back 10 years or more when the system was very much an admin application for a few office staff only. Unfortunately, the reality now is the DfE, parents, student, other schools, other systems, now want and need (in some cases legally) that information, and schools have to start preparing for this reality. Now.

If schools can embrace the positives that more regular data movement will bring, not just in hardship saved with continual data entry & manual census and data exchanging, but when the myriad of supporting systems schools use begin to appropriately tap into this data stream (more oceanic current by that time) and every data silo is synchronised, schools can start to transform their teaching and learning practices through in-time analysis, resource appropriation and targeted intervention.