

University of Malmö, Sweden  
4 February 2014

## **VISIONS OF EDUCATION, ROADS TO REFORM: PISA, THE GLOBAL RACE AND THE CAMBRIDGE PRIMARY REVIEW**

**Robin Alexander**  
University of Cambridge, UK

### **The race is on**

We start with an ultimatum from UK Prime Minister David Cameron:

We are in a global race today and that means an hour of reckoning for countries like ours. Sink or swim, do or decline.<sup>1</sup>

I'm sure you've heard similar warnings in Sweden. You will certainly recognise the scenario: globalisation, the shifting balance of world economic power from west to east, the rise of China, the decline of Europe and the United States, the pressure on schools and universities to concentrate their efforts on producing a workforce with the skills for competing and winning in the global markets of today and tomorrow. So, as Cameron says: 'Sink or swim, do or decline.'

Adding greater urgency to this narrative are the international surveys of student performance in which both Sweden and Britain participate, and especially OECD's PISA tests of reading, mathematics and science achievement among 15-year olds. Many governments now cite PISA as the main or only justification for their educational reforms, for reading, maths and science are seen as the sole foundation of economic competitiveness and the reformers don't ask themselves whether this traditional assumption remains valid or sufficient. Indeed PISA's monopoly of the debate about educational standards and systemic reform is something OECD itself is happy to encourage. Thus, in his introduction to the reports on PISA 2012, OECD's Secretary-General claims:

PISA has become the world's premier yardstick for evaluating the quality, equity and efficiency of school systems ... By identifying the characteristics of high performing education systems PISA allows governments and educators to identify effective policies that they can then adapt to their local contexts.<sup>2</sup>

You only need to look at the United States – consistently the world's biggest economy yet equally consistently a merely average PISA performer – to realise that the true story of economic cause and effect is more complicated. As to whether one test of the performance of 15 year olds in mathematics can evaluate not just their mathematical attainment, which seems a reasonable claim, but also the quality, equity and efficiency of their entire education system, that's more open to debate. Is it really the case, for example, that mathematics can

---

<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister Cameron's speech to the Conservative Party Conference, 10 October 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-19890459>

<sup>2</sup> OECD (2013), *PISA 2012 Results. What Students Know and Can Do: student performance in mathematics, reading and science* (Volume I), Paris: OECD, p 3.

serve as a proxy for the quality of a student's education in the arts and humanities? Or that teaching quality can be measured by test scores alone?

Yet in many of the 65 participating countries, comparing PISA outcomes has become a political and media obsession, prompting celebration in a handful of capital cities but panic and blame in many more. Meanwhile, PISA's league table format reinforces the belief that in Cameron's era of 'sink or swim, do or decline' education must be viewed, simply and unambiguously, as a race in which student competes against student, school against school, state against state, nation against nation. Or, as President Obama's \$4.35 billion flagship initiative calls it, a 'Race to the Top'. As for the enlightenment ideal of education as a civilising force that enlarges minds and enriches cultures: forget it.

Like all races, I need hardly add, the global education race allows only two outcomes, winning or losing. Winning is fine, but with losing comes the risk of humiliation. Race to the Top, in the White House's words, will enable America's students to 'out-compete any worker, anywhere in the world.'<sup>3</sup> It seems that the White House has already forgotten a similar promise in President Clinton's *Educate America Act* of 1994. 'By the year 2000,' proclaimed Clinton, 'America will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.'<sup>4</sup> Did it win that race, or even come close to winning it? Not according to OECD. In PISA 2012, the United States was ranked below average (26<sup>th</sup>) in mathematics and merely average (21<sup>st</sup>) in science.

Wait a moment, though. That apparent failure may be a comment on PISA as much as American education, for the paradox that OECD and American policymakers are unable or unwilling to explain is that despite its modest PISA showing the United States consistently wins many of the other races that matter. Thus the United States remains the world's strongest economy. Riding on the back of its immense wealth its universities utterly dominate the world rankings, with only three non-American universities - Cambridge, Oxford and UCL, London - in the top ten and other countries only beginning to make a showing lower down the list.<sup>5</sup> On that basis it's not surprising that the United States also has over 40% of the world's Nobel prize winners, many of them in science, the subject in which its schooling is no more than average. By the same token, not one of the top-performing PISA countries, in 2012 all of them in East Asia - come anywhere near the top of the league table for Nobel prizes - a league table in which Sweden does rather well, coming out sixth *per capita*. On the other hand, at the very top of the per capita list for Nobel prizes are the Faroe Islands. That spectacular performance is clearly a statistical oddity rather than an educational triumph. And when we disaggregate the figures we find that the United States may have swept the Nobel field in chemistry, physics and medicine, but it is outperformed in literature by France.

So what, really, is the value of league tables featuring units as wildly different as are the world's 196 countries in terms of population, culture, values, politics, demography and income? Do Nobel prizes reflect the achievements of nations, or of individuals whose work is so exceptional that it transcends national boundaries? Do university top rankings reflect a nation's intrinsic intellectual prowess or the wealth with which its universities can recruit the world's brightest students and academics, often drawing them away from poorer countries

---

<sup>3</sup> The White House (2009) *Fact Sheet: the Race to the Top*, 24 July, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/fact-sheet-race-top>

<sup>4</sup> *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, Section 102

<sup>5</sup> (i) ARWU-Shanghai rankings, 2013, <http://www.shanghairanking.com/>

(ii) Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2013-14, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2013-14/world-ranking>

that desperately need to retain such talent? And what does PISA really measure? Can it really be, as OECD claims, 'the premier yardstick for evaluating education systems?'

But these days such questions are swept aside in the PISA-led race to the top. And whose race is it? Governments take the credit for success and offload the blame for failure, but it's on the performance of students that the performance of everyone else – teachers, schools, education systems, national policies – is judged. PISA panic has indeed placed a heavy burden of responsibility on today's 15-year olds.

And after the results are announced, what then? Race tactics dictate that losers should study the performance of winners. Hence the keen interest in the education systems of the PISA front-runners: Shanghai-China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Macao and Japan. Each of these systems now enjoys or endures a steady procession of PISA tourists, eager to discover what it is in their educational performance, training and facilities that gives them the edge over the other competitors. (Finland has slipped somewhat from its eminence in PISA 2009 but because it bucks the eastward trend it remains a focus of interest). In this eagerness to learn and copy 'what works', minor inconveniences like the heavily selective Shanghai sample or the distorting effect of out-of-school coaching in many East Asian countries, or, more tragically, the number of children driven to depression and suicide by the relentless pressure to succeed, are ignored.

At this point a maverick competitor enters the race. He (and it usually is he) is called political ideology, sibling to opportunism. Ideology is the lens through which the other competitors are viewed, and ideology is the filter through which evidence and explanations about their success must pass. Hence the striking phenomenon of politicians praising Finland but then doing the exact opposite of what Finland's evidence dictates: praising a country in which social equity and strong public schooling are paramount and then opting for policies which dismantle public schooling and accentuate rather than reduce inequality.<sup>6</sup>

I have set the scene. Now, in this lecture, I shall do three things. First, I shall identify problems in the way that many policymakers use international comparisons to inform educational policy. Second, I shall consider one education reform movement that claims international provenance and is currently influential but is actually much less successful than its proponents claim precisely because it makes evidence subservient to ideology. Third, I shall tell you about a rather different road to educational reform which is driven neither by misplaced international comparison nor by political ideology but by a much broader range of evidence relating to children, their world and their education, and by a vision for our children's education that doesn't deny the need for economic competitiveness but believes that other educational goals are equally important. That alternative is the Cambridge Primary Review.

Two important arguments run through what I shall say. First, if we wish to improve the quality of our national educational systems we should certainly study and learn from the policies and practices of others, and PISA, TIMSS and other student achievement surveys are essential tools in this process. But we shall be more successful if we combine the intelligent application of international evidence with an honest and searching analysis of our own *national* situation – in Britain, the United States, Sweden or wherever we are. Unfortunately, these two conditions – a rounded and mature national perspective and appropriate use of international evidence – are early and frequent casualties of the global educational race.

---

<sup>6</sup> Ravitch, D. (2013) *Reign of Error: the hoax of the privatisation movement and the danger to America's public schools*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf

My second argument is that school and system improvement are as much about educational vision as student achievement. Student achievement is of course paramount, but only in so far as it relates to a vision of education which is morally defensible and socially productive as well as commercially marketable, and which attends with no less urgency to the development and wellbeing of the individual and the health of society, humanity and our planet than to the economic needs of the nation. Such concerns rarely feature in the rhetoric of the global educational race. Yes, we want our students to be literate, numerate and scientifically aware. That goes without saying. But is it enough?

My final introductory point is this: I stress, as I do on every occasion when I am invited to speak outside my own country, that I do not presume to comment on the situation here. It is for you to decide how far what I say is relevant to Sweden.

### **International evidence and national policy**

The way the discourse of international comparison is dominated by international achievement surveys like PISA and TIMSS should encourage us to think about evidence. Are PISA and TIMSS the only kind of data that matters? In comparing ourselves with others have we got the balance of evidence right? Are governments taking too much notice of some kinds of evidence and too little of others?

A useful classification of international and comparative evidence on education comes from the National Research Council (NRC) of the US National Academies, which for many years has advised and commented on US participation in the international student achievement surveys. In 2003, NRC identified three main types of comparative study.<sup>7</sup>

*Type I* includes the large-scale international student achievement surveys in the tradition of TIMSS and PISA, not to mention FIMS, SIMS, FISS, SISS, TIMSS-R, PIRLS, ICCS, SITES and TEDS-M. *Type II* studies review existing data and literature in order to propose policy options in specific areas such as systemic reform, educational development, school leadership, teacher training, curriculum, pedagogy or assessment. Among the best-known Type II examples are the three McKinsey reports produced by a group headed by Michael Barber, formerly of UK Prime Minister Blair's back office and an architect of his educational reforms.<sup>8</sup>

*Type III* studies include the majority of work in the published corpus of comparative educational research. They range from descriptive accounts of individual education systems to close-grained cross-national studies of policy, schools and classrooms and the cultural and historical forces that shape them, uncovering similarities as well as differences. Type II examples include Joseph Tobin's ethnographic studies of pre-school education in China, Japan and the United States, Marilyn Osborn's and Patricia Broadfoot's exploration of the experience of being a learner in England, France and Denmark, Jin Li's re-examination of 'Chinese' and 'western' models of learning, Beatrice Avalos's studies of leadership, school

---

<sup>7</sup> National Research Council (2003) *Understanding Others, Educating Ourselves: getting more from international comparative studies in education* (C.Chabott and E.J.Eliott, editors), Washington DC: The National Academies Press, <http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?isbn=0309088550>

<sup>8</sup> Barber, M. and Mourshed, M. (2007) *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top*, Dubai: McKinsey and Company; Mourshed, M., Chijioko, C., Barber, M. (2010) *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*, Dubai: McKinsey and Company; Barber, M., Whelan, F., Clark, M. (2011) *Capturing the Leadership Premium: how the world's top school systems are building leadership capacity for the future*, Dubai: McKinsey and Company.

improvement and teacher education in Latin America,<sup>9</sup> and my own work on culture, educational policy and pedagogy in England, France, India, Russia and the United States<sup>10</sup>. Type III studies vary in scale and methodology, but their shared feature is this: they may well have direct policy applications, and in many of them policy is closely scrutinised, but their goal is the advancement of educational understanding for its own sake rather than responding to an agenda set by policymakers.

But here's the problem. NRC notes that while the majority of published international and comparative education studies are Type III, it's the Type I and II studies that receive most of the funding, political patronage and publicity. NRC adds: 'This is a loss, since many are rich in narrative detail and paint a more engaging and provocative portrait of education in other countries than do the summary bar charts and graphs typical of the larger [Type 1/2] studies.'<sup>11</sup>

What the NRC report is saying, if we can express the matter more bluntly, is that in pursuit of what they call 'evidence-based policy', governments may well ignore the larger part of the international evidence that is available to them, including evidence that could give them the insights, explanations and policy options they so urgently need.

In this matter, I believe, the problem is not the Type I studies themselves but what some Type II studies do with them. The Type I datasets that provide Type II studies with their benchmarks, from the methodologically shaky IEA and IAEP studies of the 1970s to the much more ambitious PISA 2012, have become more sophisticated and reliable, and the most recent PISA commentaries produced by OECD demonstrate considerable understanding of the challenges of cross-cultural testing and are careful not to infer more than the data allow.<sup>12</sup>

Hence my particular concern about the Type II data extrapolations and the disproportionate influence some of them exert. For the political attraction of Type II studies is that they select, mediate, repackage and re-interpret the research of others, presenting it in a form that they believe policymakers will find palatable. But being gatekeepers rather than creators of evidence, authors of Type II studies are acutely vulnerable to the charge of methodological or political bias. The McKinsey reports, in particular, draw on a remarkably narrow and

---

<sup>9</sup> Tobin, J.J., Wu, D.Y.H., Davidson, D.H. (1989) *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China and the United States*, New Haven: Yale University Press; Tobin, J.J., Hsueh, Y., Karasawa, M. (2009) *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Osborn, M., Broadfoot, P., McNess, E., Planel, C., Ravn B. and Triggs, P. (2003) *A World of Difference? Comparing learners across Europe*, Maidenhead: Open University Press; Li, J. (2012) *Cultural Foundations of Learning: east and west*, New York: Cambridge University Press; Avalos, B. (2007) 'School improvement in Latin America: innovations over 25 years (1980-2006)', in T. Townsend (ed) *International Handbook of School Effectiveness and Improvement*, Dordrecht: Springer; Avalos, B. (2008) Teacher education in Latin America: an unfinished business, *South African Review of Education* 14 (1-2), 9-28; Avalos, B. (2011) Leadership issues and experiences in Latin America, in T. Townsend and J. MacBeath (eds) *International Handbook on Leadership for Learning*, Dordrecht: Springer.

<sup>10</sup> Except in a footnote: Alexander, R.J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford: Blackwell-Wiley; Alexander, R.J. (2008) *Essays on Pedagogy*, Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>11</sup> NRC 2003, 23-4.

<sup>12</sup> OECD (2010) *PISA 2009 Results: learning trends*, Paris: OECD; OECD (2010) *PISA 2009 Results: what makes a school successful?* Paris: OECD; OECD (2010) *PISA 2009 Results. Overcoming social background: equity in learning opportunities and outcomes* (Volume II), Paris: OECD; OECD (2010) *PISA 2009 Results: executive summary*, Paris: OECD; OECD (2011) *PISA 2009 Results: quality time for students – learning in and out of school*, Paris: OECD; OECD (2011) *PISA 2009 Results: against the odds*, Paris: OECD; OECD (2013), *PISA 2012 Results. What Students Know and Can Do: student performance in mathematics, reading and science* (Volume I), Paris: OECD; OECD (2013), *PISA 2012 Results. Excellence Through Equity: giving every student the chance to succeed* (Volume II), Paris: OECD; OECD (2013), *PISA 2012 Results. Ready to learn: students' engagement, drive and self-beliefs* (Volume III), Paris: OECD.

partisan range of sources, and they cite no Type III studies at all.<sup>13</sup> In a recent and devastating critique, British researcher Frank Coffield portrayed the McKinsey reports as

the work of 'global' policy analysts, remote from the complexities of classrooms and the discomfiting findings of researchers ... They espouse a ... model of schooling ... characterised by relentless pressure, competition, line managers, customer services, data for performance management, accountability and value for money; and professional autonomy for teachers only when granted by the centre ... Their notion of teaching is narrowly conceived and technocratic ... Their model remains unsophisticated, impracticable and undemocratic ... Their recommendations are educationally and socially dysfunctional and should not be part of school reform in a democracy.<sup>14</sup>

I shall have more to say about this view of education and educational reform later. Meanwhile, there are wider concerns about the current discourse of international comparison.

First, it has become dangerously over-politicised. For example, between 1997 and 2010 TIMSS and PISA data were enlisted to prove the success of the UK Labour government's drive to raise standards in English schools, a drive which as it happens was shaped by the same Michael Barber who later produced the McKinsey reports. Then in 2010 there was a general election which Labour lost. The new government immediately used PISA 2009 to show that far from rising, student performance had 'plummeted' under Labour from 12<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> in the world<sup>15</sup> and the Education Secretary's doom-laden verdict to Parliament barely concealed his party's political delight: 'Literacy, down; numeracy, down; science, down: fail, fail, fail'. However, after re-analysing the data John Jerrim of London University's Institute of Education concluded that they neither justified such alarmist claims nor provided a safe evidential basis for the sweeping policy changes which the current UK government began to introduce after its election in 2010.<sup>16</sup> Earlier studies commissioned by the Cambridge Primary Review had come to a similar conclusion about the Labour government's much more optimistic interpretation of the international and national test data.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere I have been critical of two British examples which, it seems to me, are unacceptably selective in their evidence and over-influenced by their political patronage: (i) Reynolds, D. and Farrell, S. (1996) *Worlds Apart? A review of international surveys of educational achievement involving England*, London: Ofsted; (ii) Oates, T. (2010) *Could Do Better? Using international comparisons to refine the national curriculum in England*, Cambridge Assessment. For critiques of both, see Alexander, R.J. (2012) Moral panic, miracle cures and educational policy: what can we really learn from international comparison (the 2011 SERA Lecture), *Scottish Educational Review*, 44(1), 4-21, and Alexander, R.J. (2012) International evidence, national policy and classroom practice: questions of judgement, vision and trust, keynote lecture at the Third Van Leer International Conference on Education, Jerusalem, 24 May, [http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads/publications/public\\_lectures/2012/20120524\\_Van\\_Leer\\_Alexander.pdf](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads/publications/public_lectures/2012/20120524_Van_Leer_Alexander.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Coffield, F. (2012) Why the McKinsey reports will not improve school systems, *Journal of Education Policy*, 27(1), 131-149.

<sup>15</sup> Young, T. (2010) British schoolchildren now ranked 23<sup>rd</sup> in the world, down from 12<sup>th</sup> in 2000, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 December.

<sup>16</sup> Jerrim, J. (2011) *England's 'plummeting' PISA test scores between 2000 and 2009: is the performance of our secondary school pupils really in decline?* DoQSS Working Paper 11-09, Institute of Education, University of London.

<sup>17</sup> Tymms, P. and Merrell C. (2010) Standards and quality in English primary schools over time: the national evidence, in Alexander, R.J., Doddington, C., Gray, J., Hargreaves, L. and Kershner, R. (ed), *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Routledge, 435-460; Whetton, C., Ruddock, G. and Twist, L. (2010) Standards in English primary education: the international evidence, in Alexander, R.J., Doddington, C., Gray, J., Hargreaves, L. and Kershner, R. (ed) *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Routledge, 461-483.

It seems only fair to ask how far, and in how many countries, PISA results are being manipulated for party-political gain.

Second, PISA assesses the attainment of 15 year olds in aspects of reading, mathematics and science. Its spectrum of 'key competencies', though undoubtedly essential, is also limited. OECD itself acknowledges this, saying that PISA covers just 'some of the knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in society'.<sup>18</sup> I repeat: some of the essential knowledge but not all. OECD is right, and governments should pay attention. PISA is not a proxy for the whole of a child's education. It tests what it tests, and no more. PISA outcomes are not a sufficient basis for describing an education system *as a whole* as 'high performing' or 'failing'. But McKinsey and other influential Type II studies are predicated on precisely this inference, as are the policies of an increasing number of the world's governments. To them, PISA is the only evidence that matters. Regrettably, as I quoted at the start of this lecture, while the authors of PISA reports avoid such grandiose claims, OECD's Secretary-General does not.

Third, those who claim a simple cause-effect relationship, as some do, between factors like standardised textbooks, direct classroom instruction or decisive school leadership and the capacity to outperform other countries in TIMSS and PISA, risk false correlation, or the philosophers' 'fallacy of division'. X may well be a common feature of high-performing education systems a, b and c, but that doesn't demonstrate a cause-effect relationship between feature and performance. And if x is also a common feature of *low*-performing systems d, e and f, then the claimed correlation is clearly inadmissible. In fact, to stay with these examples, standardised textbooks, direct instruction and decisive school leadership are all international defaults, featuring in low-performing systems as well as high.<sup>19</sup>

But then, in this matter of cause and effect even OECD is confused. Its Secretary-General says that 'by identifying the characteristics of high-performing systems PISA allows governments and educators to identify effective policies that they can then adapt to their local contexts'.<sup>20</sup> In other words the policy creates the performance, so if you copy or adapt the policy your performance will improve. Yet a few pages later the same report says categorically, 'PISA can *not* identify cause-and-effect relationships between policies/practices and student outcomes.'<sup>21</sup>

Fourth, although much is made of Finland, politically inconvenient truths about Finland's success may be ignored. Scandinavia's own experts tell us that Finland's TIMSS and PISA performance reflects a culture that has an exceptionally high regard for literacy, a highly trained, well trusted and autonomous teaching profession, a commitment to social and educational equity shared by all political parties, a successful comprehensive school system, and close alignment of public policy in education, the economy, employment and social

---

<sup>18</sup> OECD (2012) What PISA assesses, [http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,3417,en\\_32252351\\_32235918\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,3417,en_32252351_32235918_1_1_1_1_1_1_1,00.html) (accessed February 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Benavot, A., Cha, Y-K., Kames, D., Meyer, J.W., Wong, S-Y (1991), Knowledge for the masses: world models and national curricula, 1920-1986, *American Sociological Review*, 56; Benavot, A. (2008) The organisation of school knowledge: official curricula in global perspective, in Resnick, J. (ed) *The Production of Knowledge in the Global Era*, Rotterdam and Taipei: Sense Publishers; Alexander, R.J. (2008a) *Essays on Pedagogy*, Abingdon: Routledge, chapter 2.

<sup>20</sup> OECD (2013), *PISA 2012 Results. What Students Know and Can Do: student performance in mathematics, reading and science* (Volume I), Paris: OECD, p 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p 24, my italics.

welfare.<sup>22</sup> And there's something else. Pasi Sahlberg argues that the political and professional climate must above all be characterised by *trust*, something which is in short supply in British and American political and educational life. Further, trust must be omni-directional: governments must trust teachers, and we must all be able to trust our governments and the evidence they cite in support of their policies. 'Trust can only flourish,' says Sahlberg, 'in an environment that is built upon honesty, confidence, professionalism and good governance ... Trusting schools and teachers is a consequence of a well-functioning civil society.'<sup>23</sup>

Fifth, and perversely, having praised a Scandinavian model some governments then go on to copy an Anglo-Saxon one, hence high stakes testing, a narrow curriculum, punitive inspection and the marketisation of schooling – strategies which Finland has explicitly rejected and which, as has been shown by Sharon Nichols, David Berliner, Diane Ravitch and others in the United States,<sup>24</sup> and by the Cambridge Primary Review in England,<sup>25</sup> generate considerable collateral damage while not necessarily delivering on standards. In the race between evidence and ideology, as I noted earlier, ideology always wins and evidence always loses.

Finally, once we move beyond the restricted range of system and school variables deployed in studies like McKinsey, we encounter wider social, cultural, demographic and economic conditions which directly and massively influence the educational performance of a country's students. While McKinsey rightly concludes that teachers and teaching make a considerable difference – a statement of the obvious for which we really didn't need three expensive reports – extra-educational factors like country size, per capita GDP, demography and relative equality correlate no less convincingly with PISA performance. A glance at the top end of the PISA league tables shows that with the systems in question are mostly small, rich or preferably both. To these factors, according to Wilkinson and Pickett, we must add equality and equity:

Greater equality, as well as improving the wellbeing of the whole population, is also the key to national standards of achievement and how countries perform in many different fields ... If ... a country wants higher average levels of educational achievement among its school children, it must address the underlying inequality which creates a steeper social gradient in educational achievement.<sup>26</sup>

So: small, rich and equal. High per capita GDP and a good level of education expenditure help, obviously, and small systems more readily afford conditions for coherence and the scaling up of reform. But if there are gross inequalities in wealth, employment, health and wellbeing, and in educational access, provision and quality, then the system, regardless of its size or GDP, will remain locked into chronic underperformance. This is confirmed by OECD itself in its commentaries on PISA 2009 and 2012. Equity and relative equality, OECD

---

<sup>22</sup> Lyytinen, H.K. (2002) Why are Finnish students doing so well in PISA? Paris: OECD; Fredriksson, P. (2006) What is so special about education in Finland? Paper for the EU Presidency Conference, Helsinki; Sahlberg, 2011, *op cit*.

<sup>23</sup> Sahlberg (2011) 130-1, my italics.

<sup>24</sup> (Ravitch 2010, Nichols and Berliner 2007, Ravitch 2012a, 2012b), Ravitch, D. (2010) *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, New York: Basic Books; Nichols, S.L. and Berliner, D. (2007) *Collateral Damage: how high-stakes testing corrupts America's schools*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press; Ravitch, D. (2012) *Diane Ravitch's Blog*, <http://dianeravitch.net/>

<sup>25</sup> Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Abingdon: Routledge; Alexander, R.J., Doddington, C., Gray, J., Hargreaves, L. and Kershner, R. (ed) (2010) *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>26</sup> Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2010). *The Spirit Level: why equality is better for everyone*, London: Penguin, 29-30.

concluded, are major factors in the relative performance of PISA nations.<sup>27</sup> In fact – witness Jomtien, Dakar, Education for All and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals – they are conditions for educational and social progress worldwide.<sup>28</sup> Unequal societies have unequal education systems and unequal educational outcomes, thereby entrenching their inequalities. That simple maxim is worth pondering.

Yet on such matters McKinsey is conspicuously silent. Perhaps this is because the McKinsey reports are aimed primarily at policymakers; and in particular for policymakers in countries like Britain and the United States which are among the most unequal of all the OECD nations, where the gap between rich and poor continues to widen, and where inequalities are reinforced by school marketisation, privatisation and segregation, all masquerading as choice.<sup>29</sup> In such countries the imperative of equity is the most inconvenient truth of all.

### **The rise and rise of the Global Education Reform Movement**

Back to the global educational race. If some governments refuse to acknowledge the true reasons for Finland's success and especially its paramount commitment to equity, social justice and well-supported public schooling, what race-winning tactics do they propose to adopt instead? Pasi Sahlberg, whom I quoted earlier, goes on to chart the rise and rise of what he calls the Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM. The acronym allows him to portray GERM as not so much a movement as a virus that originated in the United States and Britain, spread to other Anglophone countries such as Australia and New Zealand, and now, with political support from international development agencies and financial backing from some of the world's richest individuals and most powerful companies, is 'infecting' the reform process elsewhere.

GERM has five ways of solving the problem of systemic educational underperformance:

- The standardization of teaching and learning through national or state performance targets and standards for teachers as well as students, centrally-prescribed curricula, external testing, inspection and evaluation.
- A heavy focus on the so-called 'basic' skills of literacy, numeracy and to a lesser extent science, which are treated as the sole indices of student achievement and national educational and economic success.
- The use of low-risk ways of maximising student achievement in this narrow area of the curriculum: standardised textbooks, prescribed pedagogy and an increasingly conformist professional culture which discourages or prevents teachers from making their own decisions and creating their own paths to student learning; a homogenising strategy, then, which may raise the floor of student achievement but may also lower the ceiling.
- Corporate management models borrowed from the business world that are applied at two levels: systemically through the opening-up to business of the funding and control of state-maintained schools, sometimes for profit; institutionally through business-derived

---

<sup>27</sup> OECD (2010) *PISA 2009 Results. Overcoming social background: equity in learning opportunities and outcomes* (Volume II), Paris: OECD; OECD (2010) *PISA 2009 Results: executive summary*, Paris: OECD; Musset, P. (2012) *School choice and equity: current policies in OECD countries and a literature review*, Paris: OECD; OECD (2013), *PISA 2012 Results. Excellence Through Equity: giving every student the chance to succeed* (Volume II), Paris: OECD.

<sup>28</sup> UNESCO (2003) *Gender and Education for All: the leap to equality*, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003-4, Paris: UNESCO. UNESCO (2014) *Teaching and Learning: achieving quality for all*, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2013-14, Paris: UNESCO.

<sup>29</sup> Ravitch, D. (2013) *Reign of Error: the hoax of the privatisation movement and the danger to America's public schools*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf

approaches to organisation and management, with a heavy emphasis on targets, measurement, conformity and control that applies equally to both students and teachers.

- The use of high-stakes student testing to secure teacher, school and system accountability, often accompanied by published league tables, rewards and sanctions; in some cases, student tests may be used as the basis for hiring, paying and firing teachers.<sup>30</sup>

This model has wide and indeed bipartisan political support in Anglo-Saxon countries. Thus Barack Obama's *Race to the Top* has built directly on George W. Bush's *No Child Left Behind*, and under Obama and his Education Secretary Arne Duncan charter schools and teacher merit pay have escalated far beyond the point reached by the end of the Bush presidency. Teacher evaluation based on student test scores is now in place in the majority of US states; teachers who fail to raise student scores may be fired; schools that fail to boost scores may be shut down; and since charter schools tend to outlaw union membership their teachers have neither protection nor redress. And the doctrine of using student test scores as the main measure for evaluating teachers has been pursued with such ideological fervour that in some US states it has become absurd as well as unjust. In Louisiana some of the best teachers in the most successful schools risk losing their jobs because the test scores of their already outstanding students don't continue to rise and they appear not to be adding value.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, there has been a rapid growth in formerly public but now semi-private schools run by business entrepreneurs for profit.

In England, the current Conservative-led coalition has taken the academies programme initiated by Labour and greatly expanded it, meanwhile ratcheting up Labour's regime of a narrow curriculum, high stakes testing, school league tables and heavy-handed external teacher inspection for schools that refuse to join the academies club. To encourage the expansion of academies the UK government offers financial inducements, freedom from external control and even the prospect of reward under the UK's antiquated, heavily politicised and deeply tarnished honours system. Meanwhile, those schools and local authorities resisting such inducements are subjected to an oppressive regime of inspection to force them into submission, while in both countries, but especially the United States, the movement is accompanied by political and media attacks on the professionalism and competence of teachers. In the US, GERM's most palpable symptoms are a deeply divided education system and a profoundly demoralised teaching profession. Interestingly, the attempts of GERM advocates to appeal to parents over the heads of teachers seems to have backfired, and in many states parents have been at the forefront of campaigns to obstruct political efforts to transfer public schools to private ownership.

I urge you to read Diane Ravitch's recent book<sup>32</sup> and her remarkable blog [www.dianeravitch.net](http://www.dianeravitch.net) for daily and even hourly accounts of the devastating impact of GERM in the United States, the questionable tactics of some of GERM'S political and corporate cheerleaders, the extent to which public schooling has become corrupted by stubborn ideology and financial greed, and the way that teachers and parents are fighting back.

But, away from the public debate about the wisdom and morality of GERM, what do we know about its capacity to provide children with a good education and raise standards of educational achievement? For raising standards, after all, is GERM's public justification.

---

<sup>30</sup> Adapted from Sahlberg (2011) *op cit*, 100-103.

<sup>31</sup> Associated Press (2012) *Louisiana educators blast evaluation system*, 20 October, <http://www.shreveporttimes.com/viewart/20121020/NEWS0401/121020016/Louisiana-educators-blast-evaluation-system-?odyssey=tab%7Ctopnews%7Ctext%7CFRONTPAGE>

<sup>32</sup> Ravitch (2012) *op. cit.*

In the United States, there's now firm evidence that while assessment is essential and tests are useful, high stakes testing as advocated by GERM is counter-productive and its collateral damage to the curriculum, teaching, students, teachers and social cohesion is unacceptably severe.<sup>33</sup> We also know that basing teacher evaluation to a substantial degree on student test results is methodologically unsafe. To quote a review of the evidence on this matter by ten leading American academics:

There is broad agreement among statisticians, psychometricians and economists that student test scores alone are not sufficiently valid and reliable indicators of teacher effectiveness ... even when the most sophisticated statistical applications such as value-added modeling are employed.<sup>34</sup>

Now, as charter schools become established to the point where their outcomes can be compared with those of public schools, the claim that they raise standards is also being challenged. In Chicago and Washington DC, public schools have outperformed charter schools in the maths and reading tests, despite having a student profile which, unlike the charter schools, encompasses the full range of socio-economic status, and despite the way that some charter schools use school exclusion to enhance their results.<sup>35</sup> Similar findings are beginning to emerge from other states. The evidential basis for GERM now looks very shaky.

In England, the charter/academy movement hasn't been taken to American extremes, though some are pressing for this, and we now hear that the British government is considering whether to follow the American model of privatising state-maintained schools for profit.<sup>36</sup> However, we do now have extensive evidence on the impact of high-stakes testing in England, and it is pretty damning. In 1998, the Labour government launched a drive to raise standards. National literacy and numeracy strategies were imposed on every primary school and teacher in the land, prescribing precisely what, how, when and for how long they should teaching reading, writing and maths each day. High stakes testing of literacy and numeracy at the ages of 7 and 11 led to published school league tables and the 'naming and shaming' of schools that failed to reach the national targets. National requirements for teacher training and continuing professional development focused almost exclusively on literacy and numeracy in accordance with the requirements of the government's national strategies. A national school inspection regime policed and reported on standards and the degree to which each school was complying with the government's required strategy for raising them. Small wonder that one commentator called all this a 'state theory of learning', fully aware of the phrase's Stalinist overtones.<sup>37</sup>

Again, what did the evidence show? The Cambridge Primary Review commissioned no fewer than six separate in-depth studies of the available national and international data on standards in English primary education from the early 1990s to 2009.<sup>38</sup> On the positive side,

---

<sup>33</sup> Nichols and Berliner (2007) *op cit*.

<sup>34</sup> Baker, E.L., Parton, P.E., Darling-Hammond, L. *et al* (10 co-authors) (2010) *Problems with the Use of Student Test Scores to Evaluate Teachers*, EPI Briefing Paper 278, Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

<sup>35</sup> G.F.Brandenburg's analysis of the Washington DC data is at <http://gfbrandenburg.wordpress.com/2012/10/04/if-youre-keeping-score/>; Ben Joravsky provides a similar analysis for Chicago, <http://m.chicagoreader.com/chicago/chicagos-unionized-public-schools-outperform-charter-schools/Content?oid=7559748&storyPage=1>

<sup>36</sup> Wintour, P. (2012) 'Ex-No 10 policy chief backs profit-making schools', *The Guardian*, 17 October.

<sup>37</sup> Balarin and Lauder (2010). See note 29.

<sup>38</sup> Tymms, P. and Merrell C. (2010) Standards and quality in English primary schools over time: the national evidence, in Alexander, R.J., Doddington, C., Gray, J., Hargreaves, L. and Kershner, R. (ed), *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Routledge, 435-460; Whetton, C., Ruddock, G. and Twist, L.

the proportion of children reaching the required scores rose during the first three years of the Labour government's massive and expensive intervention, though not dramatically. However, it then levelled out. For as the Cambridge Primary Review noted:

It is often claimed in defence of national tests that they raise standards. In fact, at best the impact of national tests on standards is oblique. The prospect of testing, especially high-stakes testing undertaken in the public arena, forces teachers, pupils and parents to concentrate their attention on those areas of learning to be tested, too often to the exclusion of other activities of considerable educational importance. It is this intensity of focus, and anxiety about the results and their consequences, which make the initial difference to test scores. But it is essentially a halo effect, and it does not last; for it is not testing which raises standards but *good teaching*.<sup>39</sup>

In fact, though the Labour government judged its standards drive a success, it had far less impact on tested standards than might have been expected from its intensity of prescription, regulation and control and its level of investment: the national strategies cost the British taxpayer 2 billion pounds sterling during the decade 1998-2008. That's 21 billion Swedish kronor. Then there was the downside: a decline in students' enjoyment of reading; teaching to the test on an industrial scale; test-induced stress among both students and teachers. Meanwhile, England's historically wide gap between high and low attaining pupils in reading and mathematics persisted. Already evident at a very young age as a result of social, financial and educational inequalities, it widens rather than decreases as children move through the primary phase, and is more pronounced in Britain and the United States than in most other developed countries. This attainment gap maps closely onto indicators of inequality in other aspects of children's lives, notably income, health, housing, risk, ethnicity and social class. On top of all this, by PISA 2009 Britain's performance relative to earlier surveys appeared to be declining.

The Cambridge Primary Review's evidence also shows how, over the period 1997-2010, the British government's adoption of typical GERM strategies seriously compromised children's legal entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum. Further, since British school inspection data show a close and positive association between standards in literacy/ numeracy and the scope and quality of the wider curriculum, the narrowing of the curriculum in pursuit of a restricted definition of standards may well have had the opposite result to that intended, depressing standards in 'the basics' rather than raising them. Thus do governments, in pursuit of ideology rather than evidence, shoot themselves in the foot.

It's obvious really, isn't it? You raise standards in literacy and numeracy not by concentrating on reading, writing and number to the exclusion of all else. Instead, you provide a curriculum in which language and literacy are properly prioritised as the foundation for all later learning, but they are also embedded and applied in a curriculum that offers breath, balance, stimulation and a high quality of teaching in every curriculum

---

(2010) Standards in English primary education: the international evidence, in Alexander *et al*, *op cit*, 461-483; Harlen, W. (2007) The quality of learning: assessment alternatives for primary education, in Alexander *et al*, *op cit*, 484-520; Cunningham, P. and Raymont, P. (2008) Quality assurance in English primary education, in Alexander *et al*, *op cit*, 767-791; Balarin, M. and Lauder, H. (2008) The governance and administration of English primary education, in Alexander *et al*, *op cit*, 733-750; Wyse, D., McCreery, E. and Torrance, H. (2008) The trajectory and impact of national reform: curriculum and assessment in English primary schools, in Alexander *et al*, *op cit*, 792-817.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander, R.J. (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Abingdon: Routledge, 497.

domain. That learning in one domain enhances learning in others is now well documented.<sup>40</sup> For example we have evidence from studies using pretest/posttest and experimental and control groups that high quality classroom talk not only improves student engagement but also raises test scores in literacy, numeracy and science.<sup>41</sup> And in 2011, President Obama's Committee on the Arts and Humanities produced a report demonstrating that the arts not only motivate and engage some of America's most disaffected and alienated students, but also help raise their test scores in literacy and numeracy.<sup>42</sup> The report's honorary chair was First Lady Michelle Obama. Did her husband pause in his Race to the Top to talk to her about it? Apparently not.

Set against the American and British evidence the GERM balance sheet doesn't look good. On the one hand we have an approach to systemic reform which is largely unproven and which rests heavily on ideology, unsubstantiated claims, inappropriate models, corporate commercial interest and the denigration of public schools and their teachers; on the other we have unacceptable levels of collateral damage, a massive crisis of educational confidence in one of the world's richest nations, immense upheaval in the lives of the generation of students on whom GERM's cheerleaders have chosen to experiment, a widening of existing inequalities, and growing evidence from the very tests which are GERM's main lever for reform that it doesn't deliver what it claims.

### Is there another way?

Is there another way? Of course there is. I hesitate to mention Finland in Sweden, especially after what happened here in Malmö on 5<sup>th</sup> January,<sup>43</sup> but Finland is the best-known alternative to GERM and education isn't ice hockey. Sahlberg tells us that his country manifests unwavering commitment to social and educational equity through a genuinely comprehensive school system of consistently high quality; its educational and other social policies are carefully and effectively aligned; it values and trusts its teachers and trains them to an exceptionally high level before giving them considerable classroom autonomy; and it has no national tests, no league tables, no draconian national system of inspection, no national teaching strategies, and indeed none of the so-called 'levers' of systemic reform in which the British government has invested so much.

These features of Finnish education are well-known. They add up to a model which opposes GERM in respect of both values and strategy. What Finland has done is to front-load systemic reform by concentrating on what it sees as the two basic ingredients of a high-achieving school system: *equity* and *teaching quality*. The Finns are categorical in their belief that it is the combination of these, going back to the *peruskoulu* (common or comprehensive school) legislation of the 1960s and building on it through reforms to teacher recruitment and training, that has produced the high standards that Finland has achieved not just in the three PISA subjects but also across the curriculum as a whole.

---

<sup>40</sup> For example by the Cambridge Primary Review: Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education*, Routledge, chapter 14.

<sup>41</sup> Alexander, R.J. (2012) *Improving oracy and classroom talk in English schools: achievements and challenges*, London, DfE;  
[http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads/\\_news/2012/02/2012\\_02\\_20DFE\\_oracy\\_Alexander.pdf](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads/_news/2012/02/2012_02_20DFE_oracy_Alexander.pdf);  
 Resnick, L.B., Asterhan, C., Clarke, C. and Hofkens, T. (ed) (2013, forthcoming) *Socializing Intelligence* [papers from the AERA Pittsburgh conference], Washington DC: AERA.

<sup>42</sup> President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (2011) *Reinvesting in Arts Education: winning America's future through creative schools*, Washington, DC: President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.

<sup>43</sup> Finland beat Sweden 3-2 to win the world junior ice hockey title.

In contrast, the British and American governments have rejected their countries' earlier visions of equity and entitlement enshrined in comprehensive and community high schools in favour of marketisation, 'choice' and competition (which, as the Swedish experience also shows, are divisive as well as ineffective), and have introduced quality controls or levers which operate much further down the line than in Finland, and arguably too late to make a real and lasting difference. Headed by core standards and high stakes testing of students and teachers, these focus on outcomes rather than input and process. The British government's one 'Finnish lesson' to date, marginally raising the bar for graduate entrants to teacher training, is a modest and probably pointless adjustment compared with what is required in Finland, where only one out of every ten 10 applicants is accepted to train as a primary teacher.<sup>44</sup> So in England the front loading is too weak and the controls or levers are applied too late.

Finland's model is one alternative to GERM. Here's another that aims to front-load reform across an even broader spectrum: the Cambridge Primary Review.<sup>45</sup> This was launched in October 2006, after two years of consultation and planning. It has been supported since then by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, one of Britain's leading charitable trusts, and this has given it the independence which is essential to its freedom and credibility. Its remit was to investigate, report and make recommendations on the condition and future of primary education in England in order to encourage well-grounded and sustainable development after two decades of non-stop, top-down, short-term and highly disruptive reform initiatives by a succession of ambitious ministers keen to make their mark as quickly and dramatically as possible.

The scope of the Cambridge Primary Review is vast – ten themes, 23 sub-themes and 100 questions covering every aspect of primary education from aims, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to school organisation, staffing, teacher training, funding, governance and of course policy. The strictly educational questions are framed by others about children, childhood, parenting and caring, the society, cultures and world in which today's children are growing up, and how all these bear on the education that young children receive. Hence the Review's strapline, which later became the title of its final report: *Children, their World, their Education*. This breadth of perspective is extremely important. You cannot determine educational aims or design a curriculum without engaging with these larger questions about childhood, society and our fragile and interdependent world.

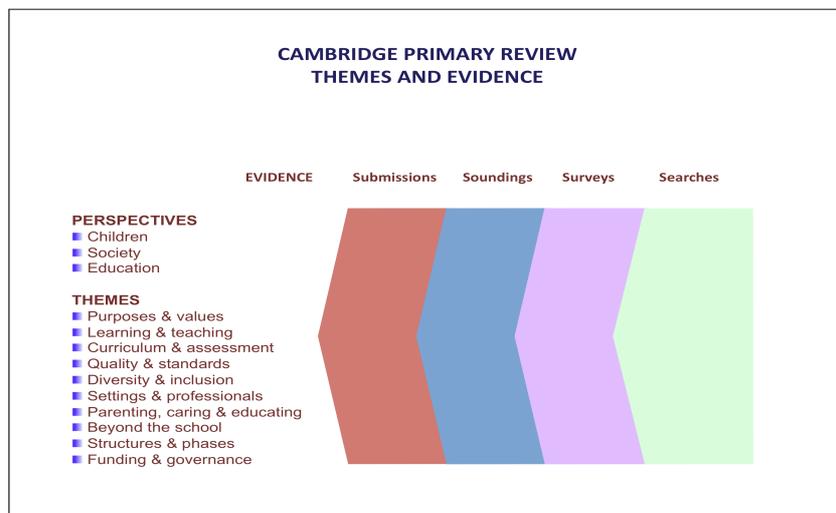
About each theme we asked 'What is?' and 'What ought to be?' and these two questions were addressed through four complementary strands of evidence. First, following the usual convention of public enquiries we invited formal written submissions, and received well over 1000 of them from most of the country's educational organisations, both official and voluntary, and from many groups and individuals, plus many thousand more in the form of emails. The submissions yielded a vast compendium of experience and insight. Next, we commissioned 28 surveys of published research relating to the Review's themes and sub-themes. 66 academics in 20 university departments were involved in this strand, and between them they evaluated over 3000 published sources. Then we undertook what we called our 'soundings': 250 meetings all over the country with major educational organisations and official bodies, but also and especially with children, parents, teachers, school principals, local authorities, voluntary agencies, religious leaders, community representatives, police and many others with a perspective on children and their primary

---

<sup>44</sup> Sahlberg, P. (2010) *The Secret to Finland's Success: educating teachers*, Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education Research Brief. Stanford CA: Stanford University School of Education.

<sup>45</sup> [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk)

education. Finally, we assembled and re-assessed official demographic and statistical data relevant to our task. The figure shows the two strands – themes and evidence.



Where did all this lead? Between October 2007 and March 2009 the Review published 31 interim reports, including an account of what had emerged from the 87 regional community soundings, 28 reports on the commissioned surveys of published research, and a two-volume special report on the curriculum. These, with their accompanying briefings and media releases, were published in groups on ten occasions over that 17-month period.<sup>46</sup> Each publication event provoked media attention, and independent media analysis shows that on five of the ten occasions the Review was top UK news story overall.

In October 2009 we published the 600-page final report<sup>47</sup> together with an 850-page companion volume containing revised versions of the 28 research surveys<sup>48</sup>. Between them, the two volumes drew on over 4000 published research sources as well as all the other evidence from the submissions, soundings, surveys and searches. The final report was prepared by a group of 14 authors headed by myself, drawing on data which had been sorted and analysed by the Cambridge team. Commentators like to personalise these things, but the report's conclusions and recommendations were finalised only when we had secured the full agreement of all 14 report authors and all 20 members of the Review's advisory committee. What the Review concluded and recommended was very much a collective matter.

After the final report's publication we entered an intensive phase of dissemination, discussion and debate, from 2009-10. We gave the usual political, professional and media briefings, responded to numerous speaking invitations, and organised many dissemination conferences of our own. From all this activity we distilled eleven policy priorities for primary education which were published in the national press and sent to political and educational leaders shortly before the 2010 general election.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> All this material can be found on [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk).

<sup>47</sup> Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010) *op. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> Alexander, R.J. with Doddington, C., Gray, J., Hargreaves, L. and Kershner, R. (eds) (2010) *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Abingdon, Routledge.

<sup>49</sup> Cambridge Primary Review (2010) *Policy Priorities for Primary Education* [http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads/revised\\_2011-02/POLICY\\_PRIORITIES\\_BRIEFING\\_REVISED\\_2\\_11.pdf](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads/revised_2011-02/POLICY_PRIORITIES_BRIEFING_REVISED_2_11.pdf)

We then entered our fourth phase, from 2010-12, of building a national network of teachers and teacher educators keen to take forward the Review's findings and ideas.<sup>50</sup> At the same time we continued the tasks of dissemination and engaging with policy makers, organising or participating in over 450 dissemination, networking or policy events. Then, in April 2013, we entered our fifth phase as the Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

This not-for-profit company is dedicated to applying the Cambridge Review's evidence, principles and messages through research, a network of regional centres and an expanding alliance of schools committed to the Review's evidence and vision. At the same time, and in return for sponsorship of its core activities, the trust is working with Pearson to supply co-branded materials, consultancy and professional development support for schools.<sup>51</sup>

I've said more about the Review's strategy than its content because I'm presenting it in today as an alternative path to reform, one which empowers teachers through evidence and enhanced professional skill rather than controls, tests and belittles them. Further, the Review's range of themes and methods could readily be adapted as the basis for other national educational enquiries, while its phases - planning, collecting evidence, reporting, disseminating, consulting, networking and building professional capacity - represent an organic and sustainable approach to reform which is very different from GERM's shock tactics.

Yet, the Cambridge Primary Review's approach is not a soft option. So, of the situation in England, we say this:

Government intervention in pedagogy, whether through the national strategies or by other means, may have helped some teachers but in general has been excessive, over-politicised and ill-founded conceptually and empirically. Central prescription of teaching methods and lesson content should now cease. Teaching should be taken out of the political arena and given back to teachers. There is a necessary relationship between how teachers think about their practice and how pupils learn. Students will not learn to think for themselves if their teachers are expected merely to do as they are told.<sup>52</sup>

But then we add, lest it be thought that such autonomy means unaccountable freedom:

We need now to move to a position where research-grounded teaching repertoires and principles are introduced through initial teacher education and refined and extended through experience and continuing professional development, and teachers - like doctors - acquire as much command of the evidence and principles which underpin their teaching repertoires as they do of the skills needed in their use. The test of this alternative view of professionalism is that teachers - again, like doctors - should be able to give a coherent justification for their practices citing (i) evidence, (ii) pedagogical principle and (iii) educational aim, rather than offering the unsafe defence of compliance with what others expect. Anything less is educationally unsound.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Cambridge Primary Review (2011) *The Network*  
[http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads\\_/publications/network\\_news/2011/NETWORK\\_BRIEFING\\_5\\_11.pdf](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads_/publications/network_news/2011/NETWORK_BRIEFING_5_11.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> Cambridge Primary Review Trust (2014) *The Cambridge Primary Review Trust*

[http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads\\_/publications/overview/CPRT\\_briefing\\_Jan\\_14.pdf](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads_/publications/overview/CPRT_briefing_Jan_14.pdf)

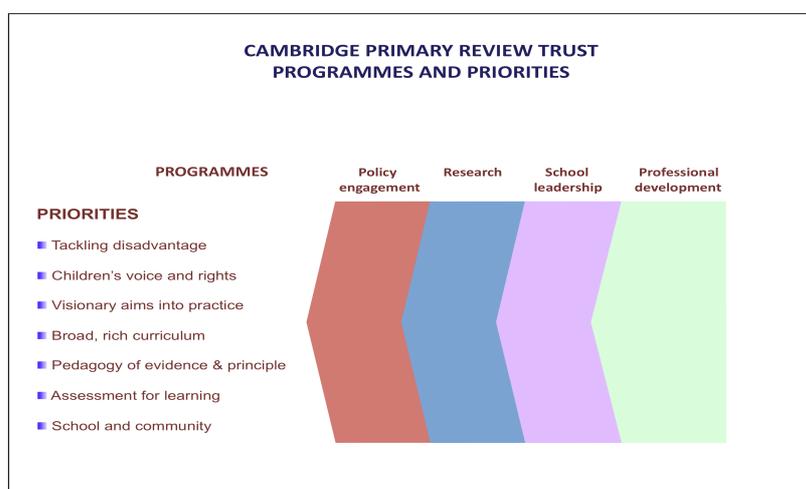
<sup>52</sup> Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Abingdon, Routledge, 496.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 496.

Many teachers, especially those who have come to depend on others for their ideas, will find transition to a self-improving system far from easy. Equally, though we are critical of the government's use of tests as the main vehicle for accountability, we say this:

We take it as axiomatic that in a public system of education teachers and schools should be fully accountable to parents, children, government and the electorate for what they do. We reject any suggestion that our proposals for the reform imply otherwise. For us, the issue is not *whether* children should be assessed (they should) or *whether* teachers should be accountable (they should), but *for what and by what means*. By insisting on a concept of standards which extends across the full curriculum rather than part of it, we are strengthening rather than weakening school accountability.<sup>54</sup>

All this came together in the eleven policy priorities that we crystallised from the dissemination meetings and policy discussions that followed the publication of our final report.<sup>55</sup> We have taken these as the basis for determining the seven priorities for the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, to be pursued through its programmes of policy engagement, research, school leadership and professional development. Those priorities are: advancing equity closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and the rest, empowering children's voice, defining 21<sup>st</sup> century aims, providing a rich entitlement curriculum in which all subjects, not just literacy and numeracy, are pursued to the highest standard, developing a pedagogy of evidence and principle, assessment for learning rather than testing for accountability, and education for community engagement and regeneration.



## Conclusion

One of the strengths of the Cambridge Primary Review, I suggest, is the way it combines within a single framework policy and practice, macro and micro, evidence and vision, process and outcome. Thus the same research programme that has exposed weaknesses in the British government's drive to raise educational standards has also formulated a powerful set of educational aims and a curriculum framework which themselves offer a more generous and ambitious vision of the educational standards we should be striving for. Means and ends, process and outcomes come together not only in what the Cambridge

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 500.

<sup>55</sup> Cambridge Primary Review (2010) *After the Election: policy priorities for primary education*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

Primary Review recommends but also in the way it has been undertaken: in its cycle of consulting, planning, conceptualising, evidence-gathering, analysing, reporting, disseminating, debating, networking and capacity-building - all of them geared, as I've said, to front-loading reform and optimising the conditions and climate for its success rather than relying on heavy-handed *post hoc* controls like high-stakes testing and sanctions against teachers and schools that fail to meet questionable performance targets.

But perhaps the most critical point of synthesis comes in the Review's insistence that those who educate others, and those who devise educational policy, should themselves model and exemplify what education is all about. Thus, as has been widely quoted, the Cambridge Primary Review asserts that 'students will not learn to think for themselves if their teachers are expected merely to do as they are told.' In other words, if we want our schools to produce thinking, reasoning, self-critical, imaginative and resourceful students they must be taught by thinking, reasoning, self-critical, imaginative and resourceful teachers.

Is it really too much to expect of politicians who pronounce on educational matters that they too should be thinking, reasoning, self-critical, imaginative and resourceful? Yet if in pursuit of education policy governments use evidence selectively, if they reduce complex issues to crude dichotomies, if they seek to marginalise and discredit alternative viewpoints rather than engage with them, if they expect the teaching profession to comply with what is little more than untested ideology, if in spite of adverse evidence they stubbornly press ahead with failing or damaging policies - all of which tendencies are now habitual in the prevailing political cultures of Britain and the United States - then they are negating the very notion of education itself.

What is striking about much of the political rhetoric of educational reform, whether it centres on the PISA league tables or the strategies that combine in what Pasi Sahlberg calls GERM, is not so much that it is misguided - after all, there's always room for debate about strategy - as that by the criteria I've just listed it is so ill-educated. What credibility can an educational reform agenda possibly have if it handles knowledge, evidence and argument in ways that flatly contradict the educational standards it claims to advance among students? Or if it prefers the cynicism and arrogance of mere cleverness to the open-mindedness and quest for truth which are the hallmark of genuine intelligence?

Above all, what is missing is *vision*. In pursuit of what it calls 'world class' education GERM reduces education to what is tested, and teaching to the meeting of targets. These days, 'world class' is the claim of governments, businesses, schools and universities everywhere, even though by now they must surely know that the phrase has become almost meaningless<sup>56</sup>. Almost meaningless but not quite, for while 'world class' is an over-used slogan it signals a clear enough goal: outperforming other schools and countries. The goal is uncomplicatedly supremacist: race to the top, a place on the PISA podium, forget about the rest.

British Prime Minister Cameron is right: we *are* in a global race. He is also right, of course, that workforce skill is critical to national prosperity. But this is not the only global race that teachers and political leaders should be thinking about. The fundamental mistake that too many governments make is to presume that economic competitiveness cannot co-exist with broader social and educational goals and that children may be given either a high level of basic skill, or a broad and rich education, but not both. On the contrary, it is a central tenet

---

<sup>56</sup> Alexander, R.J. (2010) "World class schools" - noble aspiration or globalised hokum? (BAICE Presidential Address at the 10<sup>th</sup> UKFIET Conference on Education and Development), *Compare* 40(6), 801-817.

of the Cambridge Primary Review, backed by powerful evidence, that the exact opposite is the case, and I want to give this finding as much emphasis as I can: in England's most successful primary schools basic skills are most effectively developed in a broad curriculum that engages all aspects of children's intelligence and thinking, and all their imaginative powers. Look at the PISA evidence and you'll find the same applies internationally: all the PISA top performers provide a broad curriculum, and several are also questioning the accepted definition of 'basic skill', having recognised that they may not have given sufficient attention to developing the problem-solving and creative capacities which are no less essential to economic competitiveness. And note that OECD itself argues that 'a well-educated and well-trained population is essential for a country's social and economic well-being'. Education *and* training, not one or the other. Social and economic well-being as twin and interdependent goals, not as mutually exclusive.<sup>57</sup>

Meanwhile, in a world facing the multiple crises of climate change, dwindling natural resources, over-population, environmental degradation, economic instability and an alarming level of political and religious polarisation, and in which millions of children are denied their basic human rights, including the right to primary education, it simply isn't good enough to reduce 'world class' education to PISA performance, let alone to the political posturing, untested strategies and questionable ethics of GERM. We need to consider the merits of 'world class' as *sustaining* the world rather than beating it. As fostering international interdependence and co-operation rather than pursuing the narrowest of national self-interest. Whatever happened to the *moral* purposes of public education?

And if you want practical reminders of how far the world has yet to go before it achieves world class education in this rather different sense, remember the 57 million children who still receive no schooling whatever, half of whom live - or barely survive - in countries torn apart by conflict;<sup>58</sup> and remember Malala Yousafzai, shot by the Taliban because she wanted to be educated.

This is the year in which we make sense of the reports from PISA 2012. It's the year, I suggest and hope, when we begin to recover a sense of proportion and perspective about international achievement surveys, what they tell us, what they don't tell us, and how they should be used. Following the example of the Cambridge Primary Review we can bring to the fore those other kinds of evidence which in recent decades governments have ignored. We can develop an account of educational standards and progress that doesn't arbitrarily restrict itself to what is tested. We can strive to ensure that the education debate exemplifies rather than negates what education is supposed to be about. And, as we approach 2015, the year by which the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education should be achieved but almost certainly will not be, we can replace the rampantly supremacist or narrowly nationalist view of education by a vision which is more in tune with the true complexities of globalisation, with the perilous condition of our world and with the needs of *all* the world's children.<sup>59</sup>

© 2014 Robin Alexander

Correspondence: [rja40@cam.ac.uk](mailto:rja40@cam.ac.uk)

<sup>57</sup> OECD (2012) *OECD Better Life Index*, <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/>

<sup>58</sup> UNICEF (2014) *Teaching and Learning: achieving quality for all* (EFA Global Monitoring Report 2013/14). Paris: UNESCO.

<sup>59</sup> Alexander, R.J. (2014) *Teaching and Learning: the quality imperative revisited*, keynote lecture at the UNESCO/Government of Norway/University of Oslo conference on the 2013-14 Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 3 February.