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THE PERILS OF POLICY
Success, amnesia and collateral damage
in systemic educational reform

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Prologue

Unwittingly, the British government has provided me with a perfect image of the perils of policy. [See final page] It's the cover of a government white paper called 'Building a 21st century schools system'.¹ The document outlines the last major piece of educational legislation in England before the coming general election. Driving the crane on the construction site of systemic reform is our Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, Ed Balls. The hapless children and families for which he is responsible are about to be crushed by a container-load of government initiatives. And, where, you may ask, are the 440,000 teachers who are charged with delivering the government's '21st century school system' in the classroom? Turn up the sound and you'll hear them banging frantically on the inside of the container, trying to get out.

Introduction

Of all the so-called 'levers' of systemic reform, tests seem to be the instrument of choice in policy-makers' efforts to do the two things which they believe they must always be seen to do: raise educational standards and call teachers and schools to account. This means that tests are high stakes not just for children and teachers but also for politicians, and that they may be as much about political capital as educational progress. It also means that there's always the risk that politics will drag what ought to be a carefully-considered debate about the quality of education into the gutter of electioneering.

Not surprisingly, then, there's now a highly critical counter-culture. From the United States we have a considerable literature on the role of high-stakes tests in initiatives ranging from A Nation at Risk in 1983 to NCLB, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. It's from one of the most powerful critiques of NCLB, by Sharon Nichols and David Berliner,² that I coin for the sub-title of this lecture that chilling euphemism beloved of four-star generals, 'collateral damage'. Now Diane Ravitch, former assistant education secretary to President George Bush senior, and formerly a supporter of federal government education reforms, has published a book with the sub-title 'How testing and choice are undermining education', which repudiates NCLB and the accompanying apparatus of testing and charter schools. As reviewers have been quick to point out, criticisms of high stakes tests from the left tend to be regarded as suspect, but coming from someone who has been associated with conservative administrations yet also has a reputation as a solidly independent thinker³ they cannot be so readily dismissed. Ravitch concludes:

¹ DCSF (2009) *Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future. Building a 21st century school system*, London: DCSF.

² Nichols, S.L. and Berliner, D.C. (2007) *Collateral Damage: how high-stakes testing corrupts America's schools*, Cambridge MA: Harvard Education Books.

³ As evidenced in Ravitch, D. (1983) *The Troubled Crusade: American education 1945-1980*, New York: Basic Books.

At the present time, public education [in the United States] is in peril. Efforts to reform public education are, ironically, diminishing its quality and endangering its very survival.⁴

In England, which ever since Margaret Thatcher has eagerly copied American policies across the board, literally following Americans into battle, the testing of 7 and 11 year olds was introduced along with the national curriculum in 1988 and then made pivotal to the Blair government's post-1997 standards drive.

So, inevitably, testing loomed large in the evidence to the Cambridge Primary Review, whose final report was published last October. The British government rejected the report's criticisms of its test regime and its proposals on assessment reform. But the Cambridge Review was not alone. In May 2008, the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee published a highly critical report about the government's approach to assessment and testing.⁵ It too was rejected, as were similar reports from the teaching unions and numerous distinguished experts and commentators. 'The literacy and numeracy tests of 11 year olds', insisted ministers, 'are here to stay: they raise standards, they deliver accountability, parents want them and the right-wing press want them. (Well, I made the last one up but it's an unadmitted truth). Now two of Britain's teaching unions are poised to ballot their members on whether to boycott this year's tests. Sounds familiar, even down to the identity of the media baron in question?

Indeed, tests now so dominate educational discourse in England that of the 10 major themes and 23 sub-themes covered by the Cambridge Primary Review's final report, published last October,⁶ the press mostly concentrated on just three: what we said about the school starting age (which many reporters got wrong), the tests for 11-year olds and government micro-management of what goes on in schools; or how primary schooling should start, how it should end and who should control it. There was rather less media interest in the educational process itself, in what happens during the vital formative years *between* children's entering primary school at age 4 or 5 and being tested just before they leave it at age 11. Input and outcome are what matter now: manipulate one, measure the other, and that's education. QED.

In fairness, media editors were only responding to what they thought the public wanted. Thus it was that Radio New Zealand phoned me in the middle of the night for an interview about standards and tests. The midnight tussle I had then, as the Cambridge Review has had throughout, was to make it clear that there's much more to assessment than tests, and that criticising the current test regime doesn't mean that one is soft on standards or accountability. On the contrary, as our final report says emphatically and repeatedly, the issue is not *whether* children should be assessed (they should), or *whether* schools should be accountable (they should) but *how* and in relation to *what*.

The drive to raise standards has been the cornerstone of recent education policy in England. I want now to assess what England's standards drive has achieved, and with what consequences and side effects. I also want to examine the *international* dimension of the English experience, notably policy-makers' sometimes obsessive interest in international surveys of educational achievement, their eagerness to cherry-pick the policies of those countries that top the achievement league tables, and the associated rhetoric of 'world class' schooling. Since there's increasing international convergence on matters like this, I hazard

⁴ Ravitch, D. (2010) *The Death and life of the Great American School System: how testing and choice are undermining education*, NY: Basic Books, 242.

⁵ House of Commons (2008) *Testing and Assessment: fifth special report of the Children, Schools and Families Committee*, Session 2007-8. London: TSO.

⁶ Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Abingdon: Routledge.

that what I say may have relevance to your own situation, though of course I leave that to you.

English primary education: a strategy for reform

The Blair government swept to power in 1997 with the slogan 'education, education, education'. It promised to raise standards in England's 17,300 primary schools and launched a programme of unprecedented investment and intervention. The chosen instruments of reform were:

- national literacy and numeracy strategies which prescribed in detail not just the content but also the methods of daily literacy and numeracy lessons to be taught in every primary school and classroom in the country;
- a deluge of supporting documentation – 459 government documents on the teaching of literacy alone were issued to schools during the eight years from 1996 to 2004, that's over one a week, not to mention comparable material on numeracy and much else besides;
- the extension of the existing national test regime at age 7 and 11 to include targets for the percentage of children who should achieve specified literacy and numeracy levels by 2002 and each year after that;
- the publication of annual school-by-school test results and inter-school league tables;
- a national inspection system which checked schools for compliance with the strategies and 'named and shamed' those not up to scratch;
- competencies and standards for initial teacher training and in-service professional development which were closely aligned with this agenda;
- ring-fenced funding to support in-service courses for teachers in areas of policy priority;
- local authority 'school improvement partners' charged with checking on each school's measured outcomes and ensuring that they followed the prescribed or preferred routes to improvement, again as measured by the tests;
- the extension of the powers of national bodies, and the tightening of government control over them, especially DCSF (equivalent to DEEWR), QCA (equivalent to ACARA), Ofsted (the national inspectorate) and TDA (the Training and Development Agency for Schools, responsible for teacher recruitment and training).

The standards agenda combined the truckload of sticks that I have described and a mighty bag of carrots comprising, over the period 1997-2009, 35,000 additional teachers, 172,000 teaching assistants, a 27 per cent increase in teachers' pay and a 55 per cent increase in per-pupil funding. In this sense, English primary schools had never had it so good. But it was an offer they couldn't refuse.

Success? Standards in primary education since 1997

This lecture's subtitle is 'Success, amnesia and collateral damage.' Let's turn now to the question of the degree of success achieved by the post-1997 standards agenda, leaving amnesia and collateral damage lurking with felonious intent.

The then education Secretary of State upped the ante when he launched the standards drive in 1997, promising that he would resign if the 2002 literacy and numeracy targets were not met. They were not, but by then he had been moved to another ministry, so his successor resigned instead. Yet by 2006, despite the failure to meet the targets, the government was claiming that its standards agenda had been an unqualified success. Thus, quoting the words of ministers and their advisers:

- 'Today's newly qualified teachers are the best trained ever.' (Michael Day, of the TDA, 2006).
- 'Standards stayed the same for 50 years before rising sharply in the late 1990s' (Standards supremo Michael Barber, 2007).

- 'Primary standards are at their highest ever levels. This is not opinion: it is fact.' (Schools Minister Lord Adonis, 2007).
- 'Primary standards are at their highest ever levels ... This huge rise in standards since 1997 follows 50 years of little or no improvement in literacy and represents a very good return in our investment in the literacy strategy.' (Anonymous DCSF spokesperson, 2007)
- 'Independent inspections show there have never been so many outstanding and good primary schools, and Key Stage 2 results show huge progress over the last decade.' (School Minister Vernon Coaker, in 2009).

Note the gung-ho relationship with eternity – the speakers here used the words 'ever' or 'never' four times. To test these and similar claims the Cambridge Primary Review commissioned no fewer than six independent surveys of the test and inspection data and related literature by groups of senior academics at five universities and the National Foundation for Educational Research or NFER (equivalent to your ACER). Durham University concentrated on the national test data. NFER examined the international achievement survey data featuring England – TIMSS, PISA, PIRLS and so on. Bristol University considered both the trends in the data and the wider assessment issues. Cambridge looked at the national school inspection system under Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education). Manchester reviewed literature and data across the standards agenda as a whole, taking in curriculum, assessment and the national strategies. Bath set the entire standards drive in the context of national educational policy, funding and governance.

Our three reports on the test data were published in November 2007⁷ and were duly sensationalised by the media with headlines sharply at odds with the confident claims of ministers and advisers that I've just quoted: 'Primary tests blasted by experts' ... 'Literacy drive has almost no impact' ... 'Literacy drive is flop, say experts' ... 'Millions wasted on teaching reading' ... 'Primary pupils let down by Labour' ... 'Primary schools have got worse.'

This marked the beginning of a noticeable decline in relations between the Cambridge Review and government. Matters were not helped when in February 2008 we published the other three reports, on inspection, governance and the overall trajectory of reform⁸: 'Failed!' shouted the newspaper headlines, 'Political interference is damaging our children's education' ... 'An oppressive system that is failing our children' ... 'School system test-obsessed' ... 'England's children among the most tested' ... 'Our children are tested to destruction' ... 'A shattering failure for our masters' ...

On this basis you'd be right to conclude that there wasn't really a meeting of minds on the government's standards drive. The truth of the matter, of course, lay somewhere between the political hype and media scaremongering, and indeed our reports were always careful to give credit where it was due and in general were much more positive about the government's record than was compatible with the media maxim 'First simplify, then exaggerate'. (The maxim comes from a journalist on the distinguished British weekly *The Economist*, as genially conveyed to Barry McGaw and passed on by him to the recent National Curriculum symposium). It must also be emphasised that in the British press headlines and stories can have, at best, only a tenuous relationship. Serious journalists covered our reports fairly and in depth only to find them translated into ludicrous headlines by their sub-editors. But it's the headlines that set the tone and do the damage. It's the headlines that sell newspapers. And it's to the headlines that politicians feel obliged to respond.

⁷ The three reports have now been published in revised and updated form in the companion volume to the Cambridge Primary Review final report: Alexander, R.J. (ed) with Doddington, C., Gray, J., Hargreaves, L. and Kershner, R. (2010) *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Abingdon: Routledge, chapters 17-19.

⁸ *Ibid*, chapters 26, 28 and 29.

In fact, we offered the one thing which no politician or sub-editor can cope with: a mixed message. The national and international evidence on standards, we found, was both positive and negative, and also in certain respects problematic.

On the plus side:

- Within the limitations and variations of the measures used, standards of tested attainment in English primary education have been fairly stable over time.
- Pupils' attitudes to their learning in the tested areas are generally positive, though they appear to decline with age.
- The national data show modest improvements in primary mathematics standards, especially since 1995, though different datasets tell different stories.
- The international data also show substantial improvements in primary mathematics from 1995 to 2003.
- The international data from 2001 show high standards in reading among English pupils by comparison with those from other countries, but the more recent data (from 2006 onwards) suggest that the 2001 results may have been misleading. England appears to be above the international average but not exceptionally so.
- The international data show considerable improvements in primary science by comparison with other countries, though there have been methodological reservations about the studies in question.⁹

On the minus side:

- The government's national literacy strategy has had a far less pronounced impact on reading standards than might have been expected from the level of investment (the national strategies in combination cost GBP 2 billion of taxpayers' money during the decade 1998-2008, or AUD 3.5 billion).
- Gains in reading skills have sometimes been at the expense of pupils' enjoyment of reading.
- There is some evidence of an increase in test-induced stress among primary pupils, and much firmer evidence of stress among their teachers.
- The primary curriculum has narrowed in direct response to the perceived demands of the testing regime and the national strategies, to the extent that children's statutory entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum has been seriously compromised.
- The historically wide gap between high and low attaining pupils in reading, mathematics and science has persisted. It is already evident at a very young age and widens as children move through the primary phase. The gap is far wider in Britain and the United States than in most other developed countries.
- The attainment gap maps closely onto indicators of inequality in other aspects of children's lives, notably income, health, housing, risk, ethnicity and social class. This confirms that tackling inequalities in educational outcome requires action across a broad range of public policy, including much that lies outside the control of schools.
- There is no reliable evidence on national standards in areas of children's learning outside those aspects of literacy, numeracy and science which have been tested, other than that in many schools such learning appears to have been squeezed out by the standards drive itself. This exacerbates the problems of the divided, two-tier curriculum of which we were so critical elsewhere in our report and to which I referred at the National Curriculum symposium.

Beyond this balance sheet, and serving to compromise many of the public claims about standards, were methodological problems with the evidence on which judgements about standards were based. For example:

- Up to 2000, England's national system of assessment had a low level of dependability

⁹ The assessment, in this and the following paragraphs, of the impact of the British government's standards drive is adapted from Alexander (2010), pp 471-4.

both in relation to results for a given year and as a basis for tracking trends over time. Since 2000, the quality of the data has improved, but overall this means that claims about long-term trends must be treated with scepticism.

- There are similar reservations about data from school and teacher-training inspections, where the methodology has changed too frequently to allow year-on-year comparison, and there are problems of validity in relation to what is inspected and of reliability in the inspection process.
- Though in some respects the international comparative evidence on trends in pupil attainment is encouraging, overall it is rather thin, and there are considerable challenges in the devising of international measures and the interpretation of international data.
- The concept of 'standards' is highly problematic yet is routinely presumed to be straightforward.

On the basis of our re-assessment of the standards data, we went on to challenge a long list of claims and assumptions by which the British government sought to justify its standards drive and its insistence that national tests of literacy and numeracy were the only way forward. For example:

- Testing of itself drives up standards. (It doesn't, but good teaching does).
- Parents support testing. (Not true: many parents are as worried about high-stakes testing as are teachers. They want to know how their children are getting on, but that's not the same as wanting their children their children to be subjected to high-stakes tests.)
- Tests are the only way to hold schools to account and monitor the performance of the system as a whole. (Not true: tests are one way among several).
- The pursuit of standards in the 'basics' is incompatible with a broad, balanced and enriching curriculum. (Dangerous nonsense: official inspection evidence and test data show the exact opposite, and schools which deliver high standards in the 'basics' do so in the context of a broad and well-managed curriculum).
- Literacy and numeracy are valid proxies for the curriculum as a whole. (They are not).
- England now has the best-trained teachers ever. (Empirically unsustainable, as the current measures of novice teacher competence go back only three or four years, and four years is a rather eccentric definition of 'ever').
- England has the highest standards ever. (Need I say more?)

Looming over the entire standards drive and the debate about what it is legitimate to infer from the available standards data is the problematic nature of the term 'standards'. To quote Warwick Mansell's critique:

The word 'standards' ... has been routinely abused in the last few years, by politicians and others. 'Raising standards' ... is implied to stand for improving the overall quality of education in our schools. That, in the public mind ... is what the phrase means. The reality in schools, however, is that 'raising standards' means raising test scores, as measured by a set of relatively narrow indicators laid down more or less unilaterally by ministers, and often subject to disproportionate influence by the performance of a small group of schools. These scores represent only a sub-set of schools' work. Therefore it is not clear that they stand, reliably, for schools' overall quality. The two meanings are not interchangeable, and should not be treated as such.¹⁰

The Cambridge Review's evidence shows how the pursuit of this narrow concept of 'standards' at the primary stage, in which test scores in literacy have been treated as proxies for the quality of primary education as a whole, has over the past 13 years seriously compromised children's legal entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum. We also consider it possible that because standards in the basics and the availability of a broad and balanced curriculum have been shown empirically to be linked, the narrowing of the

¹⁰ Mansell, W. (2007) *Education by Numbers: the tyranny of testing*, London: Politico's, p 26.

curriculum in pursuit of standards in ‘the basics’ may have had the opposite result to that intended, *depressing* standards in ‘the basics’ rather than raising them. As collateral damage goes, that’s pretty spectacular.

Educational standards, we argue – and this argument is central to our proposals on curriculum and pedagogy as well as assessment and standards - should be redefined as *the quality and outcomes of learning in the entire curriculum to which children are entitled by law*. This definition is close to what Warwick Mansell takes to be the public perception.

There’s a further twist. In England’s green and pleasant land of standards, tests and targets, there are performance standards for *teachers* as well as for students. These are specified as behaviours required of teachers at different stages of development from novice to expert, or what are called ‘newly qualified’, ‘post-induction’, ‘post-threshold’, ‘excellent’ and ‘advanced skills’.¹¹ But the nominated standards have no obvious empirical basis, and indeed run counter to what we do know, mainly from American research, about the way professionals develop in their thinking and practice as they acquire greater expertise.¹² The crucial point is that professionals move from a condition of needing external support to one of self-regulation in which, through experience, precedent and practice, they internalise a practical repertoire on which they draw almost unconsciously and which can yield ways of working which may look idiosyncratic but which are in fact very well grounded. But the British government’s framework for teachers’ professional development does not allow this. It requires teachers at every stage to operate within an externally-defined set of competencies, while since 1998, the national literacy and numeracy strategies have required every teacher, regardless of age, experience or situation, to teach the same four-part literacy lesson and the same three-part numeracy lesson.¹³

Thus the Cambridge Review was forced to conclude that far from raising standards of teaching this approach may actually have depressed standards by constraining the work of the country’s most talented teachers – even assuming the prescribed teaching strategies to be well-founded empirically, which in the case of national teaching standards and the national literacy strategy they are not. It’s a framework which may work tolerably well for novices, because it gives them the support they need, but our best teachers are constrained and diminished by it. Thus is the circle of learning and teaching closed. As we said in our report, ‘Children will not learn to think for themselves if their teachers are expected merely to do as they are told.’¹⁴

Collateral damage, amnesia and other policy ailments

By now you’ll perceive that we are well and truly in the territory of collateral damage. The drive to raise standards in literacy and numeracy in England’s primary schools since 1997 has undoubtedly yielded positive gains, but at some cost, educationally and professionally as well as financially. The tests have impoverished the curriculum; the national strategies and professional standards have impoverished pedagogy; in many primary schools a professional culture of excitement, inventiveness and healthy scepticism has been supplanted by one of dependency, compliance and even fear; and the approach may in some cases have depressed both standards of learning and the quality of teaching.

¹¹ TDA (2007) *Professional Standards for Teachers in England from September 2007*, London: TDA.

¹² For example: Dreyfus, H.L. and Dreyfus, S.E. (1986) *Mind Over Machine*, New York: Free Press; K.A.Ericsson (ed) (1996) *The Road to Excellence: the acquisition of expert performance in the arts and sciences, sports and games*, Lawrence Erlbaum; Berliner, D.C. (2004) ‘Expert teachers: their characteristics, development and accomplishments’, *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society* 24(3), pp 200-212; Bond, L., Smith, T., Baker, W.K. and Hattie, J.A. (2000) *The Certification System for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards: a construct and consequential validity study*, Greensborough: University of Greensborough.

¹³ The British government’s approach to teachers’ initial training and continuing professional development is discussed in detail in the Cambridge Primary Review final report, pp 406-436.

¹⁴ Alexander (2010) p 496.

One of the Cambridge Review's commissioned research surveys suggested that the British government's standards package since 1997 has amounted to

a state theory of learning ... based on the idea that a combination of the repeated high stakes testing of pupils, a national curriculum, and in primary schools mandated pedagogy in literacy and numeracy, will raise standards ... There is little doubt that the machinery of surveillance and accountability makes it difficult for schools to deviate from focusing on test performance.¹⁵

In our final report we quoted this paragraph but warned against the 'Stalinist overtones' of the phrase 'a state theory of learning', saying that such a charge needed to be proved or refuted rather than unthinkingly adopted. Ignoring the warning but joyously seizing on the word, one right-wing British newspaper launched a stinging attack on the government's 'Stalinist control of teaching.' First simplify, then exaggerate ...

But of more fundamental concern is what our evidence revealed not just about the *substance* of policy but also about the way policy is created and sustained. The Review took place against a backdrop of growing concern about the condition of democracy in Britain. The Power enquiry sponsored by the Joseph Rowntree Trust reported 'high and widespread alienation' towards politicians, the main political parties and the country's key institutions. Dismissing claims that the public had voluntarily disengaged from formal political processes out of apathy, the 2006 Power report concluded:

Citizens do not feel that the processes of formal democracy offer them enough influence over political decisions ... the main political parties are widely perceived to be too similar and lacking in principle ... people feel they lack information or knowledge ... The political parties are widely held in contempt ... Voting is simply regarded as a waste of time.¹⁶

No less seriously, the Power report talked of a 'crisis of disengagement': a 'loss of mandate and legitimacy'; a 'loss of dialogue between government and governed'; the growth of a 'quiet authoritarianism' ... where 'policy is made in consultation with a small coterie of supporters ... and general elections become empty rituals.'¹⁷

The *Power* analysis is widely shared by political commentators and historians, and it speaks to a malaise which is more profound than the scandal of MPs' expenses which has so exercised the British press during the past year. These are the conditions which ensure that an independent enquiry like the Cambridge Primary Review, however authoritative and well founded evidentially it is, will make little headway if it says what a government does not wish to hear.

The British government's response to independent reports from many sources and on many topics, not just from the Cambridge Review and not just on education, show how far the proper discourse of policy – rational, respectful of evidence yet prepared to test it, responsive to alternative viewpoints, open to criticism – has been degraded in Britain. In place of a discourse likely to create policies which have the best chance of success with the minimum of collateral damage, we have four corrosive pretenders, the discourses of dichotomy, derision, myth and meaninglessness.

The discourse of dichotomy reduces everything to mutual exclusives, to a choice between grossly over-simplified alternatives, to the politics of them and us. If you aren't for us, you

¹⁵ Maria Balarin and Hugh Lauder, quoted in Alexander (2009), p 291. The research survey in which the authors test the published evidence for this claim is in Alexander, Doddington, Gray, Hargeaves and Kershner (2010) *op cit*, chapter 26.

¹⁶ Joseph Rowntree Trust (2006) *Power to the People: the report of Power, an independent enquiry into Britain's democracy*, York: Joseph Rowntree Trust, pp 16-17. Discussed in the Cambridge Primary Review final report, chapter 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp 33-35.

must be against us, and there's no middle ground. Caught in the crossfire are matters of vital importance but also some complexity: curriculum, pedagogy, the question of how we define quality in education. The discourse of dichotomy gives them no quarter. Basics vs breadth, child-centred vs subject-centred, standards in literacy and numeracy vs the collapse of civilisation as we know it.

The discourse of derision defines the tone of government responses to anything that has been said and done which is off-message. If you don't like it, first misrepresent then ridicule it, personalising the attack where possible and appealing to the lowest common denominator of popular prejudice.

If the discourses of dichotomy and derision are crude and transparent, the *discourse of myth* is perhaps more insidious. It's the tendency, again endemic in British policy discourse but particularly striking since 1997, to ignore history or to rewrite it to conform to and support the current agenda, and to underwrite exaggerated accounts of progress; hence the reference to amnesia in this lecture's sub-title. We've heard hints of it in the claims about standards – abysmal before 1997, rising dramatically since then so that we now have the best standards, teachers and schools ever.

While the discourse of myth is about the denial or destruction of the past, then the *discourse of meaninglessness* is about the destruction of language itself. Once you've negotiated all that macho, militaristic nonsense that politicians love - tough new initiatives, step changes, hitting the ground running, driving up standards, rolling out innovation, zero tolerance, best practice, world class schools, back to basics and the rest - you encounter the mind-numbing banalities of managementspeak.

Thus, the influential McKinsey report *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top* offers nuggets like this:

Top-performing school systems leverage a substantial and growing knowledge about what constitutes effective school leadership to develop their principals into drivers of improvement in instruction.¹⁸

I've read this many times and I still don't understand what it means – or, more to the point, whether it means anything at all. But it certainly impressed the British government.

The bigger picture: world class education?

Which brings us neatly to the international context which is invoked to justify national policies such as those which the Cambridge Primary Review has examined. 'My ambition', said England's current Education Secretary in his introduction to that government White Paper with the unfortunate cover picture, 'is for this country to have the best school system in the world ... schools are central to our ... vision ... to make this the best place in the world to grow up.'¹⁹ Or, firmly back in the category of the discourse of meaninglessness, is the stated aim of QCDA, England's equivalent to ACARA, 'to develop a modern, world class curriculum that will inspire and challenge all learners and prepare them for the future.'²⁰ QCDA could hardly set out to develop an outdated, parochial curriculum that would bore and alienate learners and prepare them for the past. On second thoughts ...

The British National Health Service has also been infected by the 'world-class' bug – if you'll pardon the unfortunate metaphor. 'World class commissioning,' we are told, 'will be the

¹⁸ Barber, M. and Mourshed, M. (2007) *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top*, Dubai: McKinsey and Company, p 30.

¹⁹ DCSF (2009) p 2.

²⁰ <http://www.qcda.gov.uk/8665.aspx> (accessed August 2009).

delivery vehicle for world class clinical services and a world class NHS.²¹ When the phrase ‘world class’ is used three times in one sentence we might ask whether it amounts to anything at all. Indeed, in her 2002 study of the relationship between education and economic growth, Alison Wolf comments that ‘In recent years, the term “world class...” has become a political and marketing slogan, with little attempt to define its meaning.’²²

In fact, ‘world class’ is rather more than a slogan because it has teeth - and they bite. Academics at British universities have recently had their research output judged ‘recognised nationally’, ‘recognised internationally’, ‘internationally excellent’ or ‘world leading’; and this produces yet more league tables, and, crucially, is linked to the level of funding which each university receives. Internationally, a place in the THES-QS ‘top 100 universities’ ranking is eagerly sought. In 2009 the field was led by Harvard, Cambridge, Yale, UCL, Imperial, Oxford and Chicago.²³ In the Shanghai ARWU ‘top 500’ list the front-runners were Harvard, Stanford, Berkeley, Cambridge, MIT and Caltech.²⁴ Naturally, I only *pretend* that I don’t care where Cambridge is placed.

Both lists were, and always are, dominated by American universities. The Toronto *Globe and Mail* asked, on behalf of its envious Canadian readers, ‘How do the Americans do it?’ - answering, without a moment’s hesitation, ‘money, of course ... a significant world-class university is a billion-dollar a year operation, minimum.’ Never mind, according to statistics provided by *The Economist*, that the United States also outperforms Canada on much less desirable indicators - such as alcohol consumption, childhood obesity and the proportion of its population in prison; and never mind that Canada is in the happy or should I say euphoric position of outperforming the United States not just in school-level educational achievement but also in cannabis use per head of population.²⁵ Never mind that Canada is much higher up the UNICEF league table of childhood well-being than the United States. Never mind Canada’s superior performance on any number of contrary indicators of educational quality and social well-being. For that matter, never mind that British universities have stormed home in 2009 with four out of the top six places in the TES list, but came bottom in the 2007 UNICEF rankings of childhood well-being in the world’s richest nations.²⁶ Never mind all that: world class schools and universities are what matter most.

But America’s dominance of the world university league tables isn’t matched at school level: 22nd in maths and 19th in science in PISA 2006; 11th at grade 8 and 9th at grade 4 in TIMSS 2007. In these matters Canada is well ahead, and in the discrepancy between school and university performance may lie uncomfortable truths about what money can *not* buy, and about what, for the 50 per cent of Americans who do not go to university, money should be spent on but is not. The discrepancy, much sharper in England and the United States than elsewhere, between supposedly ‘world class’ university rankings and other measures, whether of poverty, equity, well-being or school performance, ought to raise some very uncomfortable questions indeed for the governments of these two countries – questions which are moral no less than economic.

Pursue ‘world-class’ across linguistic boundaries and something different begins to emerge, eventually. On German websites the recurring phrase *Weltklasse Erziehung* - world class education - turns out to be a translation of President Obama’s nomination acceptance speech, when he said ‘Now is the time to finally meet our moral obligation to provide every child a world-class education, because it will take nothing less to compete in the global economy.’ So on Russian websites, references to world class education take you to the World Bank’s attempts to encourage the ‘modernisation’ of Russian schools and universities on

²¹ Britnell, M. (2007) ‘World class commissioning: NHS sets out to lead the world, *Health Service Journal*, 8 November.

²² Wolf, A. (2002) *Does Education Matter? Myths about education and economic growth*, London: Penguin.

²³ <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/hybrid.asp?typeCode=438>

²⁴ <http://www.arwu.org/ARWU2009.jsp>

²⁵ The Economist (2009) *The Economist Pocket World in Figures 2009* London: Profile Books.

²⁶ UNICEF (2007) *Child Poverty in Perspective: an overview of child well-being in rich countries. Innocenti Report Card 7*, Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

western lines. It looks like the familiar problem, then: globalisation as westernisation, or – as our French colleagues would no doubt argue – ‘world class’ as Anglo-Saxon cultural and linguistic imperialism.

But explore the French connection further and you’ll find a concept of education *au niveau mondial* - at global level - which has little to do with McKinsey’s ‘How the best-performing school systems come out on top’ and much more to do with global consciousness. At this point, a fault line opens up between world class as *beating* the world, and world class as *understanding, engaging with* and indeed *sustaining* the world; between competition and co-operation; between education for national supremacy and education for global interdependence.

This alternative perspective is also gathering strength, and it is no less driven by global awareness. But here some very different league tables command our attention: for example, the ranking from 1st to 179th place on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) which bands nations by ‘high’, ‘medium’ and ‘low’ human development with its composite measure of life expectancy, education and *per capita* GDP, and for 2007-8 placed Iceland in triumphant first place²⁷. That was before the meltdown of Iceland’s banking system eerily foreshadowed what global warming will soon do to its glaciers.

Talking of global warming, the subtitle of the 2007-8 HDI report - *Human solidarity in a divided world* – effectively captures the gulf between the two versions of ‘world class’:

Climate change is the defining human development challenge of the 21st century ... In a divided but ecologically interdependent world, it challenges all people to reflect upon how we manage the environment of the one thing that we share in common: planet Earth. It challenges us to reflect on social justice across countries and generations ... It challenges the entire human community to undertake prompt and strong collective action based on shared values and a shared vision.²⁸

‘Shared values and a common vision’: how very different from ‘How the best-performing school systems come out on top.’

What has facilitated and encouraged the supremacist view of world class education in high income countries is the availability of data which positively *invite* the league table treatment. Those data have been mainly provided by the IEA and OECD, who between them have produced the achievement studies in mathematics, science, reading literacy, citizenship and technology which announce themselves by bewildering acronyms like FIMS, SIMS, FISS, SISS, TIMSS, TIMSS-R, PIRLS, ICCS, SITES, TEDS-M and PISA.

I stress, though, that my concern is not the achievement surveys themselves, which in the right hands are valuable tools of policy, but what people do with them. Thus from PISA the McKinsey report extrapolated its ‘top ten’ school systems’ and concluded:

Analysis of these top ten school systems suggests that three things matter most: 1) getting the right people to become teachers, 2) developing them into effective instructors and, 3) ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child.²⁹

I don’t know how much the McKinsey enquiry cost, but I’m not sure that if I were told that my children need good teachers, good teacher training and good teaching, I would think it worth paying the bearer of this stunning piece of intelligence.

²⁷ United Nations Development Programme (2008) *Fighting Climate Change: human solidarity in a divided world* (Human Development Report 2007/8), UNDP.

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ Barber and Mourshed, p 2.

I should have asked, of course, whether you are interested in discovering the world's top ten school systems, as listed by McKinsey. They are: Belgium, Canada, Finland, Hong Kong, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea ... and - you can relax now - Australia. But, saving your blushes – and mine too, for this is yet another sporting fixture in which Australia has annihilated England - what a strange list. It includes countries, a city state, a special administrative region, unitary national systems and devolved federal systems. What on earth can they have in common? Well there is something, and I'll reveal it in a moment.

But of all these so-called 'systems', Finland's is the one whose educational magic everyone wishes to capture. But do the systemic reformers really understand what makes Finnish education so effective? McKinsey picks out, in its typically banal way, good teachers, teacher training and teaching. Other commentaries highlight factors such as:

- relative cultural and linguistic homogeneity;
- low rates of immigration;
- a well-motivated and educated teaching force with a high entry bar – only 15 per cent of applicants to teacher training courses are accepted;
- high levels of student interest and engagement with reading *outside* school;
- universal entitlement to high-quality pre-school education coupled with a relatively late start to formal schooling and an emphasis on thoroughly preparing children, socially and linguistically, for learning in school;
- decentralised decision-making and a high degree of institutional and professional autonomy.³⁰

Beyond these, Finland has two features which are never mentioned by those who see testing, league tables, competition and a narrow curriculum as the way to achieve 'world class' schools:

- a paramount commitment to social and educational equity through a genuinely comprehensive school system of consistently high quality, with a minimal private sector which co-exists rather than competes with the public sector;
- 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. Clear assessment criteria are written into the national curriculum and are regularly applied by teachers, but there is no national testing as such until the national matriculation examination at the end of secondary education.³¹ As I said earlier, it's not testing that drives up standards but good teaching.

Now *that's* a truly world class education system.

And what about the magic ingredient x that I hinted at? If you look at Ruzzi's 2006 synthesis of all the international achievement survey results from 1995 to 2003 (below), you'll find that at the top of the combined league table there is disproportionate representation from countries which – like Finland - have small populations and are relatively homogenous culturally and linguistically.

If you take the 19 countries which between them take the top 12 places in reading, maths and science, their average population is just 18.1 million. Remove Japan, the one country in the list with a large population, and that average national population drops to 12.1 million, which in global terms is truly minute. The McKinsey report doesn't say that the best

³⁰ (1) Fredriksson, P. (2006) 'What is so special about education in Finland? An outsider's view.' Paper prepared for the EU Presidency Conference, Helsinki, 28-29 September; (2) Lyytinen, H.K. (2002) 'Why are Finnish students doing so well in PISA?' Paris: OECD.

³¹ Eurydice (2009) *National summary sheets on education systems in Europe and ongoing reforms: Finland*. Slough: NFER.

performing school systems come out on top because they are small and rich, but if you play the game of educational cause and consequence at McKinsey's level that's what you might conclude.

Ranking of countries participating in international education assessments, grade 8 and above, 1995-2003

Ranking	Top in reading	Top in mathematics	Top in science
1	Finland	Singapore	Taiwan
2	Canada	Hong Kong	Singapore
3	Australia	Korea	Japan
4	Korea	Taiwan	Korea
5	New Zealand	Japan	Hong Kong
6	Ireland	Flemish Belgium	Finland
7	Hong Kong	Netherlands	Hungary
8	Sweden	Finland	Czech Republic
9	Japan	Canada	Netherlands
10	Netherlands	Switzerland	England
11	Liechtenstein	Slovak Republic	Australia
12	Belgium	Australia	Canada

Adapted from Ruzzi 2006³²

Yes, it is grossly simplistic. Yet take the case of the United States, which doesn't feature at all in the league tables above despite its massive educational purchasing power. It has a population of over 300 million (Finland has just 5 million). It is culturally highly diverse. There is considerable variation in educational funding and provision between individual states and school boards. There are massive disparities in the wealth, health and prospects of its citizens, and considerable divergence in matters of value and identity. It seems reasonable to suggest that in this case size, diversity and complexity militate against wealth, and that if money can buy a world-class university system, at least as judged by the chosen measures of research productivity used in the TES and Shanghai league tables, it takes much more than money to achieve a world class school system. For while university systems cater for the relatively privileged, school systems cater for all, and as Ernest Boyer once said, 'A report card on public schooling is a report card on the nation.'³³ Culture, social structure, history, values, and policies in the wider economic and social spheres matter too – a great deal. Tinkering with the school system while ignoring these won't get you very far. This is something they appear to understand in Finland, where achievement and equity are sides of the same coin.

There has to be a sting in the tail. The top ten education systems in the McKinsey list (p 11) owe their ranking to their performance in the PISA international surveys of the educational achievement of students approaching the end of compulsory schooling. PISA assesses mathematics, reading, science and problem-solving. But what of the wider curriculum? What of that 'rich, coherent, creative' curriculum we talked about at the National Curriculum symposium two weeks ago? What of the broader curriculum to which English children are entitled by law but which so many of them have been denied because of the drive to achieve supposedly world class standards in literacy and numeracy? Are maths, reading, science, and problem solving – important though they undeniably are – all that a world class education, any education, is about? Can they legitimately be treated as proxies for the whole? And if we say, no, education is certainly about what is tested in PISA but it must also be about much more, would these ten systems still top the list?

³² Ruzzi, B.B. (2006) *International education tests: an overview, 2005*, Washington, NCEE.

³³ Boyer, E.L. (1983) *High School: a report on secondary education in America*, New York: Harper & Row, p. 6, quoted in H.J. Noah 'The use and abuse of comparative education', in Altbach, P.G., Kelly, G.P. (ed) *New Approaches to Comparative Education*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Conclusion

We reached this point via England's experiment in systemic educational reform. This sought to raise standards in literacy and numeracy and thus propel England to the top of the league table of 'world class' education systems as defined by the criteria and methods of the international student achievement surveys. But, as we've seen, if it means anything at all, 'world class' is a highly questionable notion at the best of times and especially in a world in which human survival rests on international co-operation rather than national supremacy. And the abuse of the phrase 'world class' is symptomatic of that degrading of the language, vision and practice of education which seems to follow with awful inevitability when politicians cease to be content with providing a sound policy framework for the work of schools and seek to micro-manage not only what teachers do but also how they think.

The story from England is instructive but in no way is it edifying. In 2008, four eminent British educationists, one of them a university vice-chancellor - Professors Frank Coffield, Stephen Ball, Richard Taylor and Sir Peter Scott - wrote to *The Independent*, one of Britain's most respected newspapers. They said:

We have the same objectives as the government in wanting to offer a first-class education and training to all and, in particular, to narrow the attainment gap between the most and least advantaged. We have, however, become increasingly dismayed by ministers who are intent on permanent revolution in every aspect of the education system: in so acting, they demonstrate a deep lack of trust in the professional education community. It is not only the torrent of new policy that rains down on each sector, the constant changes in direction and the automatic rubbishing of any discomfiting evidence by ministers: it's also the failure of successive ministers to appreciate that reform has to be accompanied by continuity if the stability of our educational institutions and the high quality of their courses are to be preserved. We need a more consultative, democratic and inclusive way of developing and enacting policy for all the public services ... We have come independently to the same conclusion, namely that government policy is no longer the solution to the difficulties we face but our greatest problem.³⁴

When I first read this, two years ago, I thought it was an over-harsh judgement which took insufficient account of the British government's genuine achievements, and of just how difficult it is to effect real and lasting change in a complex field like education. But I and my colleagues at Cambridge and 20 other universities have now completed the biggest enquiry into English primary education for fifty years. We've studied a vast array of evidence, much of it dealing with recent policy. We've monitored the dubious trajectory of the recent standards drive. We've registered the questionable assumptions and assertions by which some policies have been informed, especially in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, testing, standards, accountability, teacher education and school inspection, some of which I have exemplified. We've noted the vacuous rhetoric surrounding the bid for 'world class' status, and the simplistic approach to international comparison, and I've illustrated that too. We've recorded the crude discourse by which policy is sometimes presented and the pre-emptive strikes against alternative views and unpalatable evidence. And we've noted government's refusal to countenance any truth but its own, and its stubborn belief that it has nothing to learn except from those who tell it what it wants to hear. In the light of this experience, I am now inclined to agree with the authors of that letter to the *Independent*. Policy has become the problem.

I say nothing about how this tale might resonate in Australia. That is your business, not mine. Like the poet Wilfrid Owen, all I can do today is warn.

³⁴ Letter to *The Independent*, 2 June 2008: <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/letters/letters-education-policy-838213.html> (accessed April 2009).

But if you come to England ... wear a hard hat.

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