

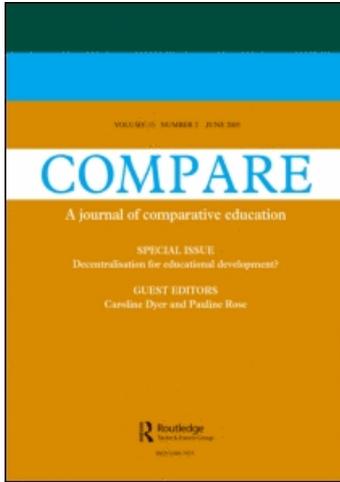
This article was downloaded by: [Blackmore, Robert][informa internal users]

On: 22 December 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 755239602]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information: <http://www-intra.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713410984>

'World class schools' - noble aspiration or globalised hokum?

Robin J. Alexander^a

^a Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

Online publication date: 19 November 2010

To cite this Article Alexander, Robin J.(2010) "World class schools' - noble aspiration or globalised hokum?", Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 40: 6, 801 – 817

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/03057925.2010.523252

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2010.523252>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www-intra.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

‘World class schools’ – noble aspiration or globalised hokum?

BAICE Presidential Address at the 10th UKFIET Conference on Education and Development 2009

Robin J. Alexander*

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

This article is an edited version of the author’s BAICE Presidential Address, which was delivered in September 2009 at the 10th UKFIET International Conference on Education and Development. The editing removes the original’s visual elements but retains its tone, more or less. The paper anatomises ‘world class’, a concept, slogan, aspiration or claim which is now in routine use in the educational discourse of anglophone countries. Fuelled by international student achievement surveys such as Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), ‘world class’ speaks to a supremacist and nationalistic mindset which contrasts with other measures of national progress, especially in relation to equality and well-being, and with those other kinds of global consciousness which are essential to interdependence, sustainability and the United Nations goal of Education for All (EFA). ‘World class’ is also methodologically reductionist, elevating simple statistical correlation over the exploration of culture and, as the McKinsey report shows, it may confine the analysis of educational cause, consequence and solution to the realm of the banal, misleading or even meaningless. The notion of ‘world class’ education thus perpetuates old and unhelpful divisions in comparative and international enquiry and raises urgent questions for comparativists and organisations like BAICE (British Association for International and Comparative Education).

Keywords: world class; schools; universities; achievement surveys; quality; equity; comparative methodology

Introduction

‘What do rich countries do?’ The question was posed at the 2009 UKFIET conference by Keith Lewin, one of my BAICE presidential predecessors, as a test of how far in their own backyards affluent nations rise to the challenges of access, enrolment, retention, quality, equity and governance on which they regularly pontificate to less affluent nations in the context of EFA.

The answer, it would seem, is that a growing number of rich nations become obsessed with what other rich nations do, extrapolating from their competitors’ success in pursuit of the accolade of ‘world class’. With access, enrolment and retention more or less taken care of, and ‘world class’ defined almost exclusively in terms of tests of student attainment in a narrow spectrum of learning, they may devote rather less attention to quality, equity and governance, which, arguably, are the hallmarks of an education system which is civilised as well as competitive.

*Email: rja40@cam.ac.uk

The symptom and problem are usefully illustrated by the British government's 2009 pre-legislative white paper *Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future: Building a 21st Century Schools System* (DCSF 2009). 'My ambition', said Secretary of State Ed Balls in the paper's introduction, 'is for [England] 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' (DCSF 2009, 2).

Some might consider the government's ambition both praiseworthy and necessary. After all, England does tolerably well in international surveys of student educational achievement like PISA, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and TIMSS; but certain countries in Scandinavia and Southeast Asia consistently do better. Even as I write, government advisers and media commentators are pondering the secret of Finland's success, asking which Finnish policies they should copy and devising ever crueller ways to make poor Michael Sadler turn in his grave.

Meanwhile, in a league table somewhat more attuned to those other EFA criteria, quality and equity, the UK came last in the 2007 UNICEF report on childhood well-being in the world's 21 richest nations (UNICEF 2007). Aggravating and to a considerable degree explaining Britain's low ranking in the UNICEF study was a per capita income gap which in the UK was wider than in most other countries with a high gross domestic product (GDP) apart from the United States (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Moreover, as Karen Dunnell, the British government's chief statistician, told *The Guardian* in 2008:

Britain grew richer during Tony Blair's decade in power, but for large sections of the population it did not become fairer ... The income gap between high- and low-earners was not affected by the measures introduced while Gordon Brown was chancellor to raise the living standards of the poor. (Carvel 2008)

So what do rich nations do? In England's case, the long tail of student under-achievement, which offsets the nation's otherwise respectable ranking in the international surveys, maps with considerable precision onto the demography of income, unemployment, health, risk and ethnicity. Conversely, as is shown in Wilkinson's and Pickett's groundbreaking reassessment of the international data on income, health, education and social wellbeing, more equal societies are not only happier but more successful, and the relationship is causal rather than coincidental (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).

Thus it was that the Cambridge Primary Review's comprehensive 2006–2009 enquiry into the condition and future of English primary education identified poverty and inequality as far more genuine and urgent crises of British childhood than the 'cult of celebrity' on which the media have tended to fixate (Alexander 2009, 488); while closing the overlapping and contingent gaps in wealth, well-being and educational attainment headed the list of policy priorities which the Review presented to the leaders of the political parties contesting the May 2010 general election (Cambridge Primary Review 2010).

This is the background to this paper's examination of the idea and reality of 'world class' education. I shall examine the way that in education 'world class' tends to be defined and measured, the problems which are raised by the prevailing definition, criteria and methods, and the wider educational and indeed moral questions which the 'world class' enterprise raises. I shall also refer, by way of case study, to a publication which epitomises the 'world class' educational quest and which bears the characteristic title *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top*, otherwise known as the McKinsey report (Barber and Mourshed 2007). As a blueprint for educational

reform and the achievement of world class schools, the McKinsey report on education was embraced in Britain with a degree of political enthusiasm matched only by the speed with which the same politicians rejected the McKinsey report on health.

Talking of which, Britain's National Health Service (NHS) has also been infected by the 'world class' bug (if you will pardon the tasteless medical metaphor). McKinsey's brief from the Department of Health was to advise on 'how commissioners might achieve world class NHS productivity' (McKinsey and Company 2009), and 'world class commissioning,' we were told, 'will be the delivery vehicle for world class clinical services and a world class NHS' (Britnell 2007). 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 (2002) comments that 'In recent years, the term "world class ..." has become a political and marketing slogan, with little attempt to define its meaning'. It is in the category of meaningless slogans that we might place the stated aim of England's Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency 'to develop a modern, world class curriculum that will inspire and challenge all learners and prepare them for the future' (QCDA 2009). QCDA could hardly set out to develop an outdated, parochial curriculum that would bore and alienate learners and prepare them for the past, though there are no doubt some disaffected students who would find this recipe closer to their experience.

International usage

In fact, 'world class' is rather more than a slogan, for it has teeth – and they bite. Every few years, the research of academics and departments at British universities is assessed on behalf of the UK government against criteria such as 'recognised nationally', 'recognised internationally', 'internationally excellent' and of course 'world leading'. Internationally, similar exercises rank the world's universities using criteria such as Nobel Prizes, highly cited researchers, and papers appearing in the Science and Social Science Citation Indices. A place in the THES-QS 'top 100 universities' ranking is eagerly sought. In 2009 the winners were Harvard, Cambridge, Yale, UCL, Imperial, Oxford and Chicago (THE 2009). The 2009 Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) 'top 500' list was again headed by Harvard, with Stanford, Berkeley, Cambridge, MIT and Caltech close behind (Center for World Class Universities/Institute of Higher Education of Shanghai Jiao Tong University 2009).

Both lists were, and always are, dominated by American universities. Thus 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' (Usher 2006; emphasis in original). Never mind, according to statistics provided by *The Economist* (2009), that the United States also outperforms Canada on 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. Never mind that Canada was much higher up the 2007 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: world class universities are what matter.

But, significantly, America's dominance of the world university league tables is not 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 that discrepancy may lie uncomfortable truths about what money cannot buy, and about what, for the 50% of Americans who do not go to university, money could be spent on but is not. So, in his presidential nomination acceptance speech at the Democratic Party convention in August 2008, Barack Obama 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'. In response, there are few United States school boards which have not by now adopted the term 'world class', often in bafflingly diverse ways. Go to Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, the United States – any anglophone country - and you will find yourself inspired or irritated by the same aspirational rhetoric, and by the associated anxiety: 'Can our schools become world-class?', quavers the *Toronto Globe and Mail* (Usher 2006).

But if we pursue 'world class' across linguistic boundaries something different begins to emerge. On German websites *Weltklasse-Erziehung* turns out to be not an educational clarion call but merely a translation of 'world class education' as commended in the Obama nomination acceptance speech quoted above. On Russian websites 'world class education' takes one to the World Bank's attempts to encourage the 'modernisation' of Russian schools and universities on American lines. So is 'world class' just another symptom of globalisation as westernisation, or – as our French friends would no doubt have it – *l'impérialisme anglo-saxon*?

But explore the French connection further and you will 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 rather more to do with global consciousness. At this point, we note two contrasting definitions: world class as *beating* or *conquering* the world and world class as *understanding, engaging with* and indeed *sustaining* the world; between competition and cooperation; between education for national supremacy and education for global interdependence.

American cable television magnate Glenn R. Jones may well be right that education is now the biggest market in the world. It is in that knowledge that education systems find themselves competing to secure market dominance in terms of the best students and researchers, and it is why they feel obliged to frame their outcomes as tightly focused and marketable skills rather than pursue old-fashioned notions of a liberal education. "Economically valuable skills" is our mantra', says the Leitch Report, commissioned by the UK government to address the question of how a small and crowded country like Britain, with limited natural resources, can remain economically competitive (HM Treasury 2006, p. 2); and the mantra is dutifully repeated by many or most of Britain's university vice-chancellors.

Yet the alternative perspective is also gathering strength, and it is no less driven by global awareness. Here, some very different league tables command our attention: for example, the ranking from 1st to 179th place on the UN 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 to 2008 placed Iceland in triumphant first place (UNDP 2008). That was before the meltdown of Iceland's banking system eerily foreshadowed the predicted melting of 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'. Thus:

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 political leaders and people in rich nations to acknowledge their historic responsibility for the problem...It challenges the entire human community to undertake prompt and strong collective action based on shared values and a common vision. (UNDP 2008, p 1)

‘Shared values and a common vision’: worlds apart, one might suggest, from ‘How the best-performing school systems come out on top’.

Then there are those league tables that fill the second half of UNESCO’s annual Education for All (EFA) global monitoring reports that track the world’s halting progress towards the UN Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education by 2015 (UNESCO 2008); league tables which cover every factor and indicator that we imagine can be contingent on the achievement of the six subsidiary EFA goals, provided – a big proviso – that they can be quantified and measured. On the other hand, the discussion of EFA is vastly more sophisticated and sensitive than that which commonly attends the idea of world class schools.

And whereas, relatively few years ago, the two worlds and two kinds of consciousness remained resolutely apart, and the builders of western education systems left it to their international development colleagues, and to donors and NGOs, to worry about the millions of children and families for whom any education, let alone a supposedly world class education, was beyond reach, now connections are being made, and we find a growing interest in the national curricula of many countries in a concept of citizenship which is global rather than merely national. Thus, for example, from Scotland’s new national curriculum:

The global dimension recognises that we now live in an interdependent global society. It incorporates key concepts of human rights, diversity, conflict resolution, social justice, interdependence and sustainable development in international context. It is an essential component of developing responsible global citizens. (Scottish Government 2008)

I am aware of the reservations of those like Lynn Davies (2006) who ask whether ‘global citizenship’ may be just too vast and abstract a concept for useful purchase at classroom level. It is for that reason that in the Cambridge Primary Review we present global citizenship not as an attribute apart but as the proper extension of citizenship more locally defined (Alexander 2009, 267–80); and we tie it back into pedagogy in the same way that the 2005 EPPI review showed how understanding of citizenship as *action* (as opposed to information about the institutions of governance and the rhetoric of democracy by which such institutions are officially justified) starts with the dynamics of the classroom and the extent and manner in which children are involved in decisions about their own learning (Deakin Crick et al. 2005). Yet there is clearly a danger that global citizenship, like ‘world class’ this and that, will satisfy a feelgood requirement but achieve little else.

The genealogy of ‘world class’ education

Although visions of world domination have driven nations and their leaders ever since my Macedonian namesake set out for Iran and India in 334 BCE, its emergence as an *educational* ambition is more recent. The context of Michael Sadler’s objections to misplaced policy borrowing at the end of the nineteenth century was rivalry within the

narrow geographical frame of just two countries, Britain and Germany. By the 1980s the field was much broader. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) started amassing indicators of inputs, outputs, processes and resources for its international series *Education at a Glance*, first published in 1992. Then there was the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). Though it originated at a UNESCO meeting as far back as 1958 and was legally incorporated in 1967, its early efforts made little impact. In 1992, the so-called ‘three wise men’ report on English primary education surveyed the then available IEA and IAEP reports for evidence on how the attainment of English primary pupils compared with that from other countries, but found the data to be too sparse, inconclusive and methodologically problematic to be useful (Alexander, Rose, and Woodhead 1992, 11–17). Only with PISA and TIMSS, from 1999 onwards, do we seem to have entered an era where expert analysts are prepared to take the international achievement data seriously, and even then they invariably add notes of caution, as – to their credit – do the authors of the survey reports themselves.

Meanwhile, following the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* and the 1991 national educational goals, the 1994 *Educate America Act* (US Congress 1994) launched world class education – in the sense of global supremacy – with its famous but doomed declaration that ‘By the year 2000, United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement’. Whoever proposed ‘the best school system in the world’ and ‘the best place in the world to grow up’ for Ed Balls’s confident introduction to the 2009 white paper should perhaps have reminded him of this cautionary tale from across the Atlantic. But then, you can be sure that the person who drafted the white paper was neither a comparativist nor a historian.

What above all has facilitated and encouraged the supremacist view of world class education in high income countries is the growing 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.

In England, the study which set the seal on the trend was the review *Worlds Apart? A Review of International Surveys of Educational Achievement Involving England*, which Ofsted, England’s national schools inspectorate, commissioned from David Reynolds and Shaun Farrell (2006). Published only four years after the so-called ‘three wise men’ report had concluded that such data were as yet unsafe for use as a tool of policy, the Reynolds study proceeded not just to identify trends but also to propose causes and solutions, framing the entire analysis by the assumptions and methods of what Reynolds and his colleagues called the ‘discipline’ of school effectiveness research.

In 1996 I published a detailed critique of the Ofsted study, and the International School Effectiveness Research Project (ISERP) on which it draws, and I have since elaborated that critique (Alexander 1996, 2001a, 2008a). I do not intend to repeat it here except briefly to mention some of its salient points:

- The quality and effectiveness of whole schools and entire education systems is reduced to a statistical calculation of gain in output over input.
- The measures of input and output used are extremely restricted in relation to what we know from other sources about the contexts, conditions, processes and

outcomes of schooling and learning. Output measures are confined to students' test scores in limited aspects of a narrow range of subjects, and these are taken as proxies for pupil attainment across the entire curriculum.

- The 'process' measures which are added to the mix in order to calculate what aspects of education make a difference are no less restricted, for they must satisfy the basic requirement of measurability. Hence the fixation on measures like time on task – which the late Nate Gage called 'a psychologically empty concept' (Gage 1978, 75).
- Culture – which is absolutely central to the proper pursuit of educational comparison – is reduced to one 'factor' among many, something which is external to school life rather than that which creates it and gives it meaning.
- The literature on which the paradigm draws represents a very narrow segment of the wider literatures on comparative and international education and on school and classroom processes.

As if to celebrate these limitations, the 1996 *Worlds Apart* study said this about the kind of people who become members of BAICE:

... the frankly inept contribution which the comparative education discipline has made over time ... the presence of a large body of theories, without any apparent empirical backing ... a large range of descriptive case studies of individual schools which it is impossible to synchronise together because there are no common measures of outcomes or processes utilised ... descriptions of the range of educational, political, economic and cultural phenomena within different countries, with no attempt ever made to assess the contribution of the educational system as against that of other factors. (Reynolds and Farrell 1996, 53)

There is certainly a problem – which Angela Little (2000) noted from her systematic analysis of the comparative literature a few years ago – of a preponderance of one-country studies that are not really comparative at all. But the literature has also demarcated with considerable care the different kinds and paradigms of comparative research and the uses to which it may legitimately be put and it is clear that comparativists are as interested as the next person in cause, consequence and practical application.

Of course, criticisms of particular comparative approaches and studies are merited and necessary, and I myself entered the field deeply concerned at the almost total omission from comparative enquiry, until very recently, of pedagogy – this being the crucial point at which culture, history, policy and ideas about education come together as observable action and felt experience in the classroom (Alexander 2001b). Comparative pedagogy was a grave, even epic omission. But it is notable that in 2003 the now sadly defunct BICSE – the Board on International Comparative Studies in Education of the United States National Academy of Sciences – also found the Ofsted report's 'them and us' methodological dichotomy of large and small scale, quantitative and qualitative, decidedly unhelpful and came up instead with three main types of study, characterised more by purpose than scale or method. BICSE said:

Type I studies typically include large-scale surveys that aim to compare educational outcomes at various levels ... Type II studies are designed to inform one or more particular ... education policies by studying specific topics relevant to those policies and their implementation in other countries. Type III studies are not designed to make direct comparisons ... in terms of specific policies or educational outcomes. Rather, they aim

to further understanding of educational processes in different cultural and national contexts. (National Research Council 2003, 13)

Type I includes the large-scale international student achievement studies like TIMSS, PISA and PIRLS. Type II covers the policy-directed studies, outside the context of achievement testing, commissioned by national governments or international agencies (the *Worlds Apart* study of Reynolds and Farrell, commissioned by Ofsted, is an example). Type III includes the majority of academic comparative studies. The EFA global monitoring reports would, I suppose, represent a combination of Types I and II.

BICSE has no doubt where the power and perceived policy relevance lies, for while the majority of comparative education studies are Type III, Type I and II studies receive most of the funding, and the funding difference per study is truly vast. Type I and II studies are a multi-million dollar business. Type III studies scrape together what they can from hard-pressed funding bodies. Yet, the BICSE report goes on, in terms which contrast sharply with the comments of Reynolds and Farrell:

Although they vastly outnumber Type I and Type II studies, Type III studies often do not come to the attention of policy makers or the public. 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 many larger studies. Ethnographic and case studies, in particular, can explore cultural context in depth and, in turn, help elucidate the way education is organised and understood in different cultures. (National Research Council 2003, 23–4)

Before I turn, as I said I would, to the McKinsey report as the current manifestation of the kind of thinking that informed the 1996 *Worlds Apart* report, we might ask whether those who work within this paradigm have modified their position, perhaps heeding BICSE's conclusion. Sadly, the answer would appear to be 'no'. In a later study Reynolds and his colleagues moved from disdain to defiance:

In the United Kingdom the recent attacks upon the school effectiveness paradigm ... have extended to attacks upon the ISERP study and the thinking behind it ... Their arguments appear to be frankly non-rational to a marked degree....Throughout their writing is an intellectual temerity and doubt about 'what works' that probably reflects *simple* ignorance of the literature Perhaps the critics are *simply* taking refuge in 'context specificity' rather than facing an intellectual challenge ... that is *simply* beyond them ... If attention is paid to them, the critics may, wittingly or unwittingly, be damaging the prospects of educational advance, since countries that restrict the search for 'good practice' only to those educational settings within their own boundaries, of necessity miss potentially valuable practices from outside their own boundaries. (Reynolds et al. 2002, 287–8; emphasis added)

Once an academic resorts to *ad hominem* attacks you know that he or she has nowhere else to go (my added italics register the not-so-subliminal message that comparativists are simpletons). If comparativists try to understand the character and power of context and culture, it is not so that they can 'take refuge in context specificity' and deny the applications of what they study, but rather so that they can understand why 'what works' works *there* but may or may not work here; and so that they can move beyond copying the surface features of 'what works' to a proper understanding of the thinking which informs it. That thinking is embedded not just in culture but also in history, and comparativists also know that history is a tale of the

international traffic in *ideas* as well as people and commodities. Sadler's famous injunction against international cherry-picking (though he used the metaphor of picking flowers) is not a denial of history or an intellectual trade embargo but a note of caution about the need to temper conscious acts of educational import and export with proper understanding. For:

Cultural borrowing happens; it has always happened. Few countries remain hermetically sealed in the development of their educational systems, and for centuries there has been a lively international traffic in educational ideas and practices. So, for example, Pestalozzi mingles with Tagore, Krishnamurti and the Elmhirsts in both English and Indian progressivism; Dewey turns up briefly in China, the Soviet Union and Turkey as well more lastingly in England and the United States; both the German *Gymnasium* and the American high school help shape the development of Russian schooling; Kay Shuttleworth imports or exports the *Ecole Normale* from France to England and India; Jan Komensky (Comenius) journeys tirelessly from Moravia to Heidelberg, Amsterdam, Prague, Berlin, Paris, Stockholm, London and points between and beyond, and his principles of common vernacular schooling and carefully graduated whole class teaching, not to mention his textbooks, embed themselves deeply and lastingly in the pedagogy of many countries of central, eastern and northern Europe; and the monitorial systems of Bell and Lancaster seed themselves just about everywhere from their probable roots in what was then Madras. (Alexander 2001b, 508)

And so onwards, upwards or backwards to the 2007 report, *How the Best-performing School Systems Come Out on Top*, from the multinational management consultancy McKinsey. It is difficult not to be influenced by the report's physical format, though I shall try. It is so large that one has to stand up to read it – an act of enforced deference which I somewhat resent. Its cover is solidly constructed of cardboard of the same robust grade as is now used for eco-coffins. Inside, as in *Worlds Apart*, the baseline for McKinsey's comparative analysis is the international student achievement survey, and here too culture is mentioned only to be dismissed:

International comparisons such as ... PISA ... make it now possible to regularly and directly compare the quality of education outcomes across education systems ... But measuring performance does not automatically lead to insights as to what policy and practice can do to help students to learn better, teachers to teach better, and schools to operate more effectively. This is where McKinsey's report comes in ... With a focus on issues that transcends [*sic*] cultural and socio-economic contexts, such as getting the right people to become teachers, developing those people into effective instructors, and putting in place targeted support ... the report allows policy-makers to learn about features of successful systems without copying systems in their entirety. (Barber and Mourshed 2007, 6)

The quest for universals in education is an interesting and I believe necessary one. Certainly it informed my own comparative study of primary education in England, France, India, Russia and the United States (Alexander 2001a). But you achieve an account of what might arguably be deemed universal only by staying as close as possible to national and local culture, not by sidelining it in the way of reports such as this. Otherwise all you get is reduction to the banalities of McKinsey's conclusion:

The experiences of these top ten school systems suggest 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. (Barber and Mourshed 2007, 2)

I do not know how much this report cost – McKinsey charged the UK taxpayer £1.27 million for the report on health service reform which the British government promptly rejected, so no doubt the McKinsey study of world class schools cost something similar. But I am not sure that if I were told, after all the words, pictures, paper and coffin-grade cardboard, that children need good teachers, good teacher training and good teaching, I would gladly reach for my credit card, still less when I look at the bibliography and discover the same wilful isolation from the richness of the mainstream comparative literature which characterises other examples of the genre. Even worse, McKinsey says that good teaching matters – which it certainly does – but then announces: ‘We have chosen *not* to focus on pedagogy or curricula, however important these subjects might be in themselves. These subjects are well-debated in the literature’ (emphasis added) (Barber and Mourshed 2007, 8).

I note these omissions for the most basic of methodological reasons. If research from the school effectiveness stable stands or falls on the validity and reliability of the student attainment measures by which it judges effectiveness, then in seeking to understand what *makes* a school effective, such research also stands or falls on its capacity to engage in a conceptually valid and empirically defensible way with what schools and teachers do with the students whose attainment they seek to advance. It simply is not good enough, in a study entitled *How the World’s Best Performing Systems Come Out on Top*, where the word ‘how’ surely signals the intention to explain, to say, ‘The quality of teaching is what makes the most difference, but we are not going to discuss teaching or define quality’. What kind of an explanation is that?

For the rest, I’m afraid it is the familiar story. Here are three further examples of the frailty of this much-praised product of the world class education industry, illustrating its failure at the levels of *conceptualisation*, *veracity* and *meaningfulness*.

First, McKinsey insists that ‘All of the top-performing systems ... recognise that they cannot improve what they do not measure (Barber and Mourshed 2007, 36).

Now there’s an interesting one – not just because of its absolute faith in measurement, but because of how this translates at the level of the school. Are teachers not capable of improving children’s learning unless they measure it? What of the majority of the curriculum which in the English primary system is not measured? Are primary science, art, humanities, music and personal education incapable of improvement because they are not tested? Are only literacy and numeracy amenable to improvement? Or does McKinsey really mean ‘assess’ rather than ‘measure’, in which case we might agree that the improvement and assessment of learning go hand in hand? And is McKinsey really saying, not so subliminally, that what is *not* measured is of no importance? And what would McKinsey make of Wynne Harlen’s finding, after surveying published research on the relationship between testing and standards for the Cambridge Primary Review, that testing may *measure* standards but does not of itself *raise* them, except obliquely and temporarily? (Harlen 2009). What raises standards is good teaching. But then McKinsey opts not to discuss teaching.

My second example has to do with truth. McKinsey talks confidently about how the 25 school systems which it has chosen to benchmark actually work. Thus:

Singapore’s school system is managed from the centre and they have used this to drive through improvements in performance. In England, policymakers have relatively less control over its more decentralised school system, so they have used standards, funding, public accountability and strong support mechanisms to create the conditions under which improvement can occur. (Barber and Mourshed 2007, 40)

The comparison is interesting: Singapore's school system has just 356 schools to England's 20,000, so in this particular context does the comparison have any point? Even more interesting is the claim about 'decentralised' England, for other sources suggest that since 1987, and especially since 1997, England's school system has become one of the most highly centralised among all rich nations, delegating budgets but controlling from the centre what matters most – curriculum, assessment, quality assurance, pedagogy and teacher training – to an extent which prompted advisers to the Cambridge Primary Review to suggest that England's primary schools were subject to a 'state theory of learning' ordained by government and its agencies and enforced and policed by Ofsted, the Training and Development Agency (TDA) and local authority School Improvement Partners (SIPs) (Balarin and Lauder 2009). This was a grave and unpalatable charge, but one which after careful assessment of the evidence the Cambridge Primary Review felt obliged to uphold (Alexander 2009, 291–9).

So McKinsey falls at the hurdles of conceptualisation and veracity. It also has a problem with language and meaning. Most of the time one is merely bemused by its densely deployed management jargon, but from time to time even that dissolves into utter meaninglessness. Thus: '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 (Barber and Mourshed 2007, 30).

Taking stock

Let me work towards my conclusion by summarising the position so far. The phrase 'world class' has become both a linguistic adjunct to globalisation and the stated aspiration of national governments worldwide, especially in rich anglophone countries. It is an aspiration which covers a wide range of aspects of national life, from economic performance to public services like health and education.

When it is anything more than an unthinking cliché, and often it is not, 'world class' is defined in relation to measurable educational outputs, whether these be research productivity and international academic visibility in universities, or, in schools, student performance in international achievement surveys such as TIMSS, PISA and PIRLS.

The assessment procedures which are used in these surveys lend themselves readily to translation into league tables of nations, just as in England the national tests have been used to generate league tables of schools, and in the UK as a whole the Research Assessment Exercise has produced league tables of universities, university departments and indeed individual academics.

Linked with these developments, at school level, has been a particular approach to educational enquiry which goes by the name of school effectiveness research. This treats the national and international test scores as valid and reliable measures of school and school system effectiveness, and draws on the older tradition of process-product research to find correlates for educational input and process which will explain what it is in classrooms, schools and systems that generates effectiveness as measured at the level of outcome; and what it is that makes one school or one system more or less effective than another. Because the exercise is a statistical one, the input and process correlates which are chosen, like the outcome measures, are limited to those aspects of education which are measurable.

The enterprise as a whole, therefore, is massively skewed away from aspects of education which are not measured, either because they are unmeasurable or because they are not deemed significant enough to justify the effort. Instead, what are measured at the levels of input, process and output are taken as proxies for the whole – thus, for example, opportunity to learn and time on task as a proxy for the complexities of pedagogy, and basic literacy and numeracy as a proxy for the entire curriculum. This preoccupation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: the curriculum as taught tends to shrink until it becomes indistinguishable from the tested proxy, while the measurable aspects of pedagogy – pace in teaching, for example – are pursued as ends in themselves.

Aggravating these distortions is an unwillingness of those operating within this paradigm not just to look at other aspects of education but also to consider other kinds of research which might illuminate their understanding of what they are researching, as commended, for example, in the 2003 BICSE report referred to earlier.

The paradigm leads, inevitably, to confident but questionable claims about cause, effect, what ‘works’ and what does not, extending outwards from the process-product relationship within education to the relationship between particular educational outcomes and a nation’s economic performance. The literature tells us, however, that establishing causality in both areas is a minefield. Meanwhile, ‘what works’ educationally may be no more than what works methodologically. Reductionism is the name of the game.

The skewing of judgements on standards and effectiveness may also distort what schools actually *do*, since armed with their limited data policy makers subject schools to pressure to ‘drive up standards’ only in and through what is measured. Hence, in England, the so-called ‘standards agenda’ of mandatory literacy and numeracy strategies for every teacher, reinforced by key stage tests and teacher training, and policed for compliance by Ofsted inspection.

At international level, the world class aspiration produces an essentially supremacist ethic and ‘world class’ comes to mean ‘world-beating’. At national level, school league tables praise, name and shame, and there are uncomfortable tensions between the rhetorics of competition and inclusion.

In sharp contrast are two other kinds of globally oriented development. First, there are those who, with an eye to the fragility of international relations and the global ecosystem, see a world class education not as one which enables one country merely to *beat* the others, but as engendering the capacity to *understand, engage with* and indeed *sustain* the world while nevertheless being economically successful and productive. Out of this come a range of curricular and educational developments which are of considerable significance and potential but remain well below the radar of the supremacist view of world class schooling and their attendant measures of educational effectiveness. Second, there are those who out of a commitment to equity, social justice and national prosperity, and impelled by the inequalities that generated Jomtien, Dakar, the UN Millennium Development Goals and Education for All, study very different league tables of human development and educational progress and use them to target policies and resources which will reduce the gap between those at the league tables’ upper and lower ends.

The two worldviews ought to meet in a recognition of the inseparability of education from other aspects of national life, but they do not. School effectiveness detaches schools and systems from culture and context while education for development not only understands their power but recognises that the advancement of education must

go hand in hand with efforts to reduce, for example, poverty, gender disparity and discrimination, and improve, for example again, health and childcare.

However – and this point is crucial – both worldviews encounter acute difficulties in relation to what we mean by the *quality* of education. In the first tradition, quality actually does not feature, and the notion of ‘standards’ is preferred, standards being defined as testable and tested outcomes rather than experienced processes. In education for development, both quality and process are now deemed hugely important, as is equity, and they are a necessary corrective to the earlier though necessary preoccupation with access, enrolment and retention. At the same time, I have to say that there is the same urge to reduce quality to quantity in order that it can be indicated and measured; the same tendency to reduce the proper scope and complexity of educational process and outcome to a small number of proxies; and the same risk that the entire enterprise will be seriously distorted both in the way it is perceived and understood and in what – in the language of the McKinsey report – are defined as the essential levers or drivers of educational improvement. We need good system-level data, and inevitably it must be quantified for speedy analysis, but I do not think that in the development context we have yet solved the problem of how to quantify educational quality in a way which does justice to those aspects of pedagogy which really do make a difference – the quality of classroom interaction, for example. (The problem of indicators and measures of quality in the context of EFA, especially in the domain of pedagogy, is explored in Alexander 2008b).

Conclusion: small, rich or equal?

For those interested in cause and effect and the so-called drivers and levers of educational improvement, here are two further thoughts on Finland, the country which on the basis of its students’ performance in TIMSS and PISA currently heads the league table of ‘world class’ education systems.

What makes Finnish schooling so effective? McKinsey, as we have seen, settles for good teachers, teacher training and teaching. Others dig deeper, highlighting, alongside teachers’ motivation, entry level and qualifications, factors such as relative cultural and linguistic homogeneity; low rates of immigration; high levels of student 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 (Lyytinen 2002; Fredriksson 2006).

Beyond these, Finland has two features which tend not to be acknowledged by the architects and defenders of high-stakes standards drives such as those in England and the United States:

- a paramount commitment to social and educational equity through a genuinely comprehensive school system of consistently high quality, with a minimal private sector which coexists rather than competes with the public sector; and
- 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. (Eurydice 2009).

My second comment on Finland might look like statistical mischief-making but has a serious purpose. If we look at Ruzzi's synthesis of all the international achievement survey results from 1995 to 2003 (Ruzzi 2006), we 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 we 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 does not say that the best 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 this simple level that is what you might conclude.

It is grossly simplistic. Yet take the case of the United States, which does not feature at all in Ruzzi's league tables despite its massive educational purchasing power. It has a population of over 307 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. On some measures it is the most unequal of all the rich countries. It seems reasonable to suggest that in this case size, diversity and inequality 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 THES 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. Culture, social structure, history, values, and policies in the wider economic and social spheres matter too – a great deal.

On this basis, Japan's appearance among the 'small, rich and educationally successful' nations in Ruzzi's table is not the anomaly it might seem, for in terms of the income difference between a country's rich and poor, Japan is the most equal of the world's 23 richest nations (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010, 17). Wealthy and

Table 1. 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

Source: Adapted from Ruzzi (2006).

educationally successful Singapore is bottom of the same list but it has only 5 million inhabitants. So there is a constellation of factors in which wealth, demography, equity and relative equality all play a part alongside the school and education system factors on which McKinsey concentrates, though in the end it is culture which determines how wealth is disposed, how education is conceived and how much or little equality matters. For Wilkinson and Pickett, however, the latter is the key:

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 lots of different fields....There is not one policy for reducing inequality in health or the educational performance of school children, and another for raising national standards of performance ... 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. (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010, 29–30)

The McKinsey report rightly says: ‘The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers’ (Barber and Mourshed 2007, 40). But remember also Ernest Boyer: ‘A report card on public education is a report card on the nation. Schools can rise no higher than the communities that support them’ (Boyer 1983, p 6).

Where does all this leave an organisation like BAICE? What I have discussed here illustrates some significant and profoundly unhelpful divisions in the international discourse of education. The long-standing divide between the paradigms of comparative and development education is still with us, though it is less pronounced than it used to be and the way UKFIET and BAICE come together every two years is a testament to such convergence, or at least the hope that it can be achieved. But other divisions are less readily bridged. There is the aggressively defended barrier between the international school effectiveness movement and mainstream comparative research; and between the versions of ‘world class’ which I have explored here, between education for supremacy and education for viability, interdependence and sustainability. If the coming global crisis really is one of human survival, then this last gulf needs to be bridged, and urgently.

Finally, there is the gap between national and international consciousness in the wider education community. It is encouraging that global citizenship, despite its problematic nature conceptually, is being explored as an essential part of the school curriculum in an increasing number of countries; that the menu of modern foreign languages is now far longer than it used to be, and that many western school students are now learning languages like Mandarin Chinese and Arabic which would have been unthinkable as school subjects only a few years ago; that international student exchanges are increasingly commonplace; and that there’s a growing interest in international schools and the International Baccalaureate. But it remains the case, in Britain at least, that too often it is left for comparativists to bring an international dimension to national educational research; and that comparativists too often exist at one stage removed from other education academics.

In the Cambridge Primary Review, which published its final report on the condition and future of English primary education in October 2009, we sought to make the global dimension natural and inevitable rather than laboured; as intrinsic to the analysis of English education as the gathering of statistics on schools and local authorities; and as proper a component of the curriculum as the 3Rs. What is required, in the context of globalisation, migration, poverty, inequality, cultural fluidity, geopolitical tension and, above all, the crisis of human dignity and survival, is an

educational consciousness which is instinctively and inevitably international, and which understands that the imperatives are moral as well as economic. It is from that consciousness that truly world class education comes, and this takes us into the domains of values, purposes, curriculum, pedagogy and governance about which the McKinsey report has nothing whatever to say.

Meanwhile, in striving to reduce the divisions I have identified – between comparative and development education, between culturally engaged and culturally neglectful kinds of comparative study, between ‘world class’ education as league table supremacy and something much more profound and genuinely educative, between national research which stops at national boundaries and that which regards an international perspective as indispensable and inevitable – might I suggest that BAICE has quite an agenda ahead, if an agenda is what it seeks.

Note

1. Barber and Mourshed (2007), also referred to as the McKinsey education report.

References

- Alexander, R.J. 1996. *Other primary schools and ours: Hazards of international comparison*. CREPE Occasional Paper 1. Warwick: University of Warwick Centre for Research in Elementary and Primary Education (revised version published in Alexander 2008a, 9–42).
- Alexander, R.J. 2001a. *Culture and pedagogy: International comparisons in primary education*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Alexander, R.J. 2001b. ‘Border crossings: Towards a comparative pedagogy’. *Comparative Education* 37, no. 4: 507–23.
- Alexander, R.J. 2008a. *Essays on pedagogy*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Alexander, R.J. 2008b. *Education for All, the quality imperative and the problem of pedagogy*. CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph 20. London: CREATE.
- Alexander, R.J., ed. 2009. *Children, their world, their education: Final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Alexander, R.J., J. Rose, and C. Woodhead, 1992. *Curriculum organisation and classroom practice in primary schools: A discussion paper*. London: DES.
- Balarin, M., and H. Lauder. 2009. The governance and administration of English primary education. In *The Cambridge Primary Review research surveys*, ed. R.J. Alexander with C. Doddington, J. Gray, L. Hargreaves, and R. Kershner, 733–50. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Barber, M., and M. Mourshed. 2007. *How the world’s best-performing school systems come out on top*. Dubai: McKinsey and Company.
- Boyer, E.L. 1983. *High school: A report on secondary education in America*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Britnell, M. 2007. World class commissioning: NHS sets out to lead the world. *Health Service Journal*, November 16. <http://www.hsj.co.uk/mark-britnell-on-world-class-commissioning/213548.article> (accessed 15 August 2009).
- Cambridge Primary Review. 2010. *After the Election: Policy priorities for primary education*. http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/Downloads/Policy_Priorities_Briefing.pdf (accessed 22 October 2010).
- Carvel, J. 2008. Poverty gap has not narrowed under Labour. *The Guardian*, April 3.
- Center for World Class Universities/Institute of Higher Education of Shanghai Jiao Tong University. 2009. *Academic ranking of world universities*. <http://www.arwu.org/ARWU2009.jsp> (accessed 19 July 2010).
- Davies, L. 2006. Global citizenship: abstraction or framework for action? *Educational Review* 58, no. 1: 5–25.
- Deakin Crick, R., M. Taylor, S. Ritchie, E. Samuel, and K. Durant. 2005. *A systematic review of the impact of citizenship education on student learning and achievement*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education.

- DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families). 2009. *Your child, your schools, our future: Building a 21st century schools system*. London: DCSF.
- Economist, The*. 2009. *The Economist pocket world in figures 2009*. London: Profile Books.
- Eurydice. 2009. *National summary sheets on education systems in Europe and ongoing reforms: Finland*. Slough: NFER.
- Fredriksson, P. 2006. What is so special about education in Finland? An outsider's view. Paper prepared for the EU Presidency Conference, September 28–9, in Helsinki.
- Gage, N. 1978. *The scientific basis of the art of teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Harlen, W. 2009. The quality of learning: Assessment alternatives for primary education. In *The Cambridge Primary Review research surveys*, ed. R.J. Alexander with C. Dodding-ton, J. Gray, L. Hargreaves, and R. Kershner, 484–520. Abingdon: Routledge.
- HM Treasury. 2006. *Prosperity for all in the global economy: World class skills* (The Leitch Report). London: TSO.
- Little, A. 2000. Development studies and comparative education: Context, content, comparison and contributors. *Comparative Education* 36, no. 3: 279–96.
- Lyytinen, H.K. 2002. *Why are Finnish students doing so well in PISA?* Paris: OECD.
- McKinsey and Company. 2009. *Achieving world class productivity in the NHS 2009/10 – 2013/14: Detailing the size of the opportunity*. Dubai: McKinsey and Company.
- National Research Council. 2003. *Understanding others, educating ourselves: Getting more from international comparative studies in education*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency. 2009. <http://www.qcda.gov.uk/8665.aspx> (accessed 15 August 2009).
- Reynolds, D., B. Creemers, S. Stringfield, C. Teddlie, and G. Schaffer. 2002. *World class schools: International perspectives on school effectiveness*. London: Routledge.
- Reynolds, D., and S. Farrell. 1996. *Worlds apart? A review of international surveys of educational achievement involving England*. London: Ofsted.
- Ruzzi, B.B. 2006. *International education tests: An overview, 2005*. Washington, DC: NCEE.
- Scottish Government. 2008. *Curriculum for excellence*. <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/curriculumforexcellence> (accessed 15 August 2009).
- THE (Times Higher Education). 2009. *Top 200 world universities*. <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/hybrid.asp?typeCode=438> (accessed 15 August 2009).
- UNESCO (United Nations, Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization). 2008. *Overcoming inequality: Why governance matters*. EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009. Paris and Oxford: UNESCO and Oxford University Press.
- UNICEF (United Nations (International) Children's (Emergency) Fund). 2007. *Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries*. Innocenti Report Card 7. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.
- UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2008. *Fighting climate change: Human solidarity in a divided world* (Human Development Report 2007/8). UNDP.
- US Congress. 1994. *Educate America Act*, Section 102, 5A. <http://www2.ed.gov/legislation/GOALS2000/TheAct/sec102.html> (accessed 15 August 2009).
- Usher, A. 2006. Can our schools become world class? *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 30 October 2006. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/archives/article852033.ece> (accessed 15 August 2009).
- Wilkinson, R., and K. Pickett. 2010. *The Spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*. London: Penguin.
- Wolf, A. 2002. *Does education matter? Myths about education and economic growth*. London: Penguin.