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

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### **Introduction**

These days we hear a lot about systemic reform and of the so-called 'levers' which can be pulled or pushed to make it happen. In Britain, policy-makers believe that the bottom line for systemic reform of public education must always be the same: raising standards and calling teachers and schools to account. And to achieve these goals the lever of choice is high stakes testing; high stakes not just for children and teachers but also for politicians themselves, as at least one minister has discovered to her cost. More about that episode later.

So, not surprisingly, there's now a highly critical counter-culture. From the United States we have a vigorous 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,<sup>1</sup> that I coin for the sub-title of this lecture that chilling euphemism beloved of four-star generals, 'collateral damage'. Now, in a dramatic reversal, Diane Ravitch, the former assistant education secretary to President George Bush senior, and formerly a strong supporter of federal government education reforms, has published a book with the sub-title 'How testing and choice are undermining education', which repudiates NCLB. 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 so closely identified with conservative administrations they cannot be ignored. Ravitch concludes:

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.<sup>2</sup>

In England, which ever since the days of Margaret Thatcher has eagerly copied American policies across the board, literally following the 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, the most comprehensive enquiry into English primary education for half a century. The Review's final report was published last October. The British government rejected the report's criticisms of the post-1997 standards drive 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, a cross-party committee of senior backbench MPs

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<sup>1</sup> Nichols, S.L. and Berliner, D.C. (2007) *Collateral Damage: how high-stakes testing corrupts America's schools*, Cambridge MA: Harvard Education Books.

<sup>2</sup> Ravitch, D. (2010) *The Death and life of the Great American School System: how testing and choice are undermining education*, NY: Basic Books.

charged with keeping government education policy under scrutiny, published its own highly critical report on the British government's approach to assessment and testing.<sup>3</sup> 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.

Indeed, tests now so dominate educational discourse in England that of the 78 formal conclusions and 75 formal recommendations in the Cambridge Primary Review's final report, published last October,<sup>4</sup> the press mostly concentrated on just three: what we said about the school starting age (which many reporters got wrong, including here in Singapore), 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 much 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. What matter most, commentators seemed to be saying are input and outcome: 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 tests, now a contentious issue in that country as in Britain, Australia and of course the United States. 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 Cambridge Review argued for the reform of assessment, not its abolition, and in the new model tests would have a place, but so would other kinds of assessment. The condition which any assessment system should meet, we argued, was that it should do its job validly and reliably, and without in any way distorting the character and quality of the education it is supposed to assess.

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 its 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 these trends are far from unique to England, I believe that what I say has wider international relevance. Having said that, I must stress – and I need this to be absolutely clear – that my criticisms of policy, the policy process, the strategies adopted to raise standards and the thinking which has informed them, all relate to *England*. Nothing I say should be construed as a comment on the situation here in Singapore, whose circumstances are just about as different from those in England as it is possible to imagine. If there *are* lessons from the English experience, it is for you to draw them, not me.

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<sup>3</sup> House of Commons (2008) *Testing and Assessment: fifth special report of the Children, Schools and Families Committee*, Session 2007-8. London: TSO.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2009) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Abingdon: Routledge.

## 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,<sup>5</sup> 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.

### 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. (I said that tests could be high stakes for politicians as well as children and teachers, and in this case they certainly were). 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' (Schools Minister Vernon Coaker, in 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Moss, G. (2007) 'Lessons from the National Literacy Strategy', paper presented at the annual conference of the British Educational Research Association.

Note the gung-ho relationship with eternity – the speakers here use the words ‘ever’ three or four times. To test these and similar official 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. 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 2007<sup>6</sup> and were duly sensationalised by the media with headlines sharply at odds with the confident official claims 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 the British government. Matters were not helped when in February 2008 we published the other three reports, on inspection, governance and the overall trajectory of reform<sup>7</sup>: ‘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*). It must also be emphasised that in the British press headlines and stories can have, at best, only a tenuous relationship with each other. 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.

In fact, we offered the one thing which no 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.

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<sup>6</sup> 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. (2009) *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Abingdon: Routledge, chapters 17-19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, chapters 26, 28 and 29.

- 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 SGD 4.2 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.

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 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

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<sup>8</sup> The assessment, in this and the following paragraphs, of the impact of the British government's standards drive is adapted from Alexander *et al* (2009), pp 471-4.

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. (In England this is simply 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.<sup>9</sup>

The Cambridge Review's evidence shows how, in England, 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 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 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'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Mansell, W. (2007) *Education by Numbers: the tyranny of testing*, London: Politico's, p 26.

<sup>10</sup> TDA (2007) *Professional Standards for Teachers in England from September 2007*, London: TDA.

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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 strategies to be well-founded empirically, which in the case of national teaching standards and the national literacy strategy they were 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.'<sup>13</sup>

### **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 considerable cost, educationally and professionally as well as financially. As we say in the final report of the Cambridge Review:

As children move through the primary phase, their statutory entitlement to a broad and balanced education is increasingly but needlessly compromised by the 'standards' agenda. The most conspicuous casualties are the arts, the humanities and those kinds of learning in *all* subjects which require time for talking, problem-solving and the extended exploration of ideas. Memorisation and recall have come to be valued over understanding and enquiry, and transmission of information over the pursuit of knowledge in its wider sense.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the tests have impoverished the curriculum; the national strategies and professional teaching 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. And note that point about the damaging impact of high stakes testing on learning and teaching in *all* subjects. That includes literacy and numeracy, the very areas which the test regime was supposed to benefit.

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<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander *et al* (2009) p 496.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander *et al* (2009) p 493.

## The bigger picture: world class education?

I want to turn now to the international context which is invoked to justify national policies such as those which the Cambridge Primary Review has examined and which I've briefly reviewed.

'My ambition', said England's current education Secretary in his introduction to a recent government White Paper, '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.'<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, QCDA, the body responsible for England's national curriculum, tells us that its aim is 'to develop a modern, world class curriculum that will inspire and challenge all learners and prepare them for the future.'<sup>16</sup> 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 delivery vehicle for world class clinical services and a world class NHS.'<sup>17</sup> 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.'<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> In the Shanghai ARWU 'top 500' list the front-runners were Harvard, Stanford, Berkeley, Cambridge, MIT and Caltech.<sup>20</sup> 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. 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 stormed home in 2009 with four out of the top six places in the TES list, but Britain came bottom in the 2007 UNICEF rankings of childhood well-being in the world's richest nations.<sup>21</sup> Never mind all that: world class universities are what matter most.

But America's dominance of the world university league tables isn't matched at school level: 22<sup>nd</sup> in maths and 19<sup>th</sup> in science in PISA 2006; 11<sup>th</sup> at grade 8 and 9<sup>th</sup> at grade 4 in TIMSS

<sup>15</sup> DCSF (2009) p 2.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.qcda.gov.uk/8665.aspx> (accessed August 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Britnell, M. (2007) 'World class commissioning: NHS sets out to lead the world, *Health Service Journal*, 8 November.

<sup>18</sup> Wolf, A. (2002) *Does Education Matter? Myths about education and economic growth*, London: Penguin.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/hybrid.asp?typeCode=438>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.arwu.org/ARWU2009.jsp>

<sup>21</sup> UNICEF (2007) *Child Poverty in Perspective: an overview of child well-being in rich countries. Innocenti Report Card 7*, Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

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.

But if we pursue 'world-class' across linguistic and cultural boundaries something different begins to emerge. In France, for example, you'll find a concept of education *au niveau mondial* - at global level - which has little to do with the McKinsey report's title 'How the best-performing school systems come out on top' and much more to do with global consciousness. Here a fault line opens up between world class as *beating* or *conquering* 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 1<sup>st</sup> to 179<sup>th</sup> 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 place<sup>22</sup>. 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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

What more than anything has 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 and TIMSS the influential McKinsey report – undeservedly influential, as I shall show - 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

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<sup>22</sup> United Nations Development Programme (2008) *Fighting Climate Change: human solidarity in a divided world* (Human Development Report 2007/8), UNDP.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*

instruction for every child.<sup>24</sup>

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 gladly reach for my wallet. This, surely, is a statement of the blindingly obvious.

That's not the only nugget that McKinsey offers. The report has, at best, an uncertain relationship with the English language, being couched in the kind of management jargon which these days is a none-too-effective disguise for the absence of real thinking. Invoking once again those 'levers' of systemic reform with which this lecture started, McKinsey tells us that

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.<sup>25</sup>

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.

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: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Finland, Hong Kong, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, South Korea ... and Singapore. But what a strange list. It includes countries, a special administrative region, unitary national systems and devolved systems. Canada is represented by two of its provinces, Alberta and Ontario. Until three weeks ago Australia didn't have a national curriculum and even now is a collection of state systems rather than a national system, so it shouldn't be there at all.

Beyond these categorical oddities, what *do* these so-called systems have in common? Well there is something, and I'll reveal it in a moment. Meanwhile, let's consider Finland, the country 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 highly 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.<sup>26</sup>

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

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<sup>24</sup> Barber and Mourshed, p 2.

<sup>25</sup> Barber, M. and Mourshed, M. (2007) *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top*, Dubai: McKinsey and Company, p 30.

<sup>26</sup> (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.

- 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.<sup>27</sup> 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  $\times$  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 and Singapore - have small populations and are relatively homogenous culturally and linguistically, at least by comparison with the United States and Britain.

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 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 2006<sup>28</sup>

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.

<sup>27</sup> Eurydice (2009) *National summary sheets on education systems in Europe and ongoing reforms: Finland*. Slough: NFER.

<sup>28</sup> Ruzzi, B.B. (2006) *International education tests: an overview, 2005*, Washington, NCEE.

For while university systems cater for the relatively privileged, school systems cater for all. The McKinsey report is right to assert that ‘the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers’,<sup>29</sup> but as Ernest Boyer once said, ‘A report card on public schooling is a report card on the nation.’<sup>30</sup> Teaching matters - a great deal - but so do culture, social structure, history, values, and policies in the wider economic and social spheres. 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.

Though, as I say, the ‘small is beautiful’ thesis may look simplistic, the impressive showing of smaller countries in the international school achievement surveys does raise questions about the optimum size of education systems for coherence, consistency, a reasonable degree of popular consensus and the effective prosecution of policy. We might also bear in mind that within the United States, which overall doesn’t do well in these surveys but which is decentralised to state level, there are individual states which do as well as any of the national systems at the top of the TIMSS and PISA league tables. Massachusetts and Minnesota, for example, scored well above the international and United States average in every maths and science category in TIMSS 2007. Their populations? 6.5 million in Massachusetts, 5.2 million - very close to Singapore’s, in Minnesota.

There has to be a sting in the tail. The top ten education systems in the McKinsey list owe their ranking to their performance in the PISA international surveys of the educational achievement of students approaching the end of compulsory schooling, or in Singapore’s case to its performance in TIMSS 2003. PISA assesses aspects of mathematics, reading, science and problem-solving. TIMSS assesses aspects of maths and science. But what of the wider curriculum? 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 and TIMSS but it must also be about much more, which ten systems would top the list?

## Conclusion

Let’s move now towards a 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 the Cambridge Primary Review’s evidence shows, the standards regime adopted in England has been at best a limited success and at worst has impoverished the education of a generation of England’s children and has disempowered a generation of England’s teachers. Meanwhile, if it means anything at all, ‘world class’ is a highly questionable notion in a world in which humanity’s very survival depends on international co-operation rather than national supremacy. And we simply *cannot* allow the equating of world class education with top scores in the PISA or TIMSS tests to pass unchallenged. What kind of a world is it that allows global educational excellence to be defined in such pitifully narrow terms?

Having exposed this unhappy scenario, the Cambridge Primary Review tries to offer constructive alternatives. It does so by going back to basics – in the best sense – and asking what primary education is for, what kind of a curriculum is needed for today’s children and tomorrow’s world, what kinds of pedagogy are most likely to secure that vision, how learning is best assessed, formatively as well as summatively, the kinds of expertise which all this requires, how teachers for tomorrow’s primary schools should be trained and deployed,

<sup>29</sup> Barber and Mourshed, *op cit*.

<sup>30</sup> 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.

and how the balance of responsibilities between government and schools should be changed to re-empower both teachers and children. I say again: ‘Children will not learn to think for themselves if their teachers are expected merely to do as they are told.’

I would need a second lecture to outline and explain our proposals, which are grounded in evidence and which have already earned a high measure of professional and popular if not political support. Suffice it to say that we propose a new framework of aims which attends to the needs of the individual, the condition of British society and the wider world, and the core pedagogical tasks of primary schools, central to which is close and rigorous attention to knowledge as both induction into disciplinary and cultural understanding and exploration of what it means to know, understand, enquire, investigate, speculate and imagine. We propose a curriculum which is a matrix of these twelve aims and eight domains of knowledge, skill, enquiry and disposition, and which incorporates both national and local components. We argue for a pedagogy not of recipe, but of repertoire and principle, grounded in the now extensive body of research on how children most effectively learn and teachers most effectively teach. We propose not tinkering with tests, but wholesale assessment reform, acknowledging that tests have their place but balancing them with externally moderated teacher assessment, and reminding policy-makers that the assessment from which children learn most is not summative testing but that formative assessment and informative feedback which takes place all day, every day and is intrinsic to classroom interaction at its best (which means, sadly, that in too many classrooms such formative assessment is inadequate). As I say, I can’t explain all this, but if you are interested, it’s in the Cambridge Primary Review’s final report.

Meanwhile, we argue that in a world in which more and more is being demanded of schools, policy makers and the public need to be much more realistic about what schools can and cannot do. For in a society like Britain’s, where the massive *educational* gap between high and low attainers maps with depressing precision onto the equally massive *equity* gaps in wealth, health, wellbeing, risk, opportunity, ethnicity and social class, narrowing the educational gap requires commensurate efforts across a much wider range of social and economic policy than education alone. What schools can and should do is to concentrate on the task for which they exist and for which their teachers, one hopes, are trained: providing a rich, fulfilling and empowering education which secures children’s basic skills and much more besides. To achieve this, our report argues, we need to move from a concept of standards as test scores in limited aspects of literacy and numeracy to one which relates to the quality of provision and achievement across the entire curriculum to which children are entitled. That, contrary to the belief of those who see testing as the solution to every educational problem, is no soft option.

In pursuing its alternative vision, the Cambridge Review is not alone. Disregarding the intemperate reaction to our report from a political minority<sup>31</sup>, there’s a growing consensus across a wide spectrum of professional, parental, religious and public opinion in Britain that the obsession with tests and league tables has had its day and that we need a richer and more humane educational vision for today’s children and tomorrow’s world.

If this all seems too serious and depressing, I end with a gentle warning about the perils of policy – the title of this lecture. [See overpage] This is the cover of a recent British government white paper called ‘Building a 21<sup>st</sup> century schools system.’<sup>32</sup> The document outlines the last major piece of educational legislation in England before the coming general

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<sup>31</sup> The current British (Labour) government was elected in 2005 on the basis of 22 per cent of the electoral vote, which means that in this case, as in most recent general elections, Britain’s ‘first past the post’ electoral system effectively disenfranchised three quarters of the electorate. The ‘minority’ referred to above refers both to this anomaly and the fact that many backbench MPs and members of the House of Lords, from all political parties, have expressed their support for the Cambridge Review’s analysis, conclusions and recommendations, as have parental groups, faith leaders, voluntary organisations, teachers’ unions, schools and subject organisations. Rejection of the Review’s findings has been confined to Government education spokespersons, and was released to the media before ministers and their advisers had read the report.

<sup>32</sup> DCSF (2009) *Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future. Building a 21<sup>st</sup> century school system*, London: DCSF.

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 '21<sup>st</sup> 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.

My warning is this. If you come to England, wear a very hard hat.

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