

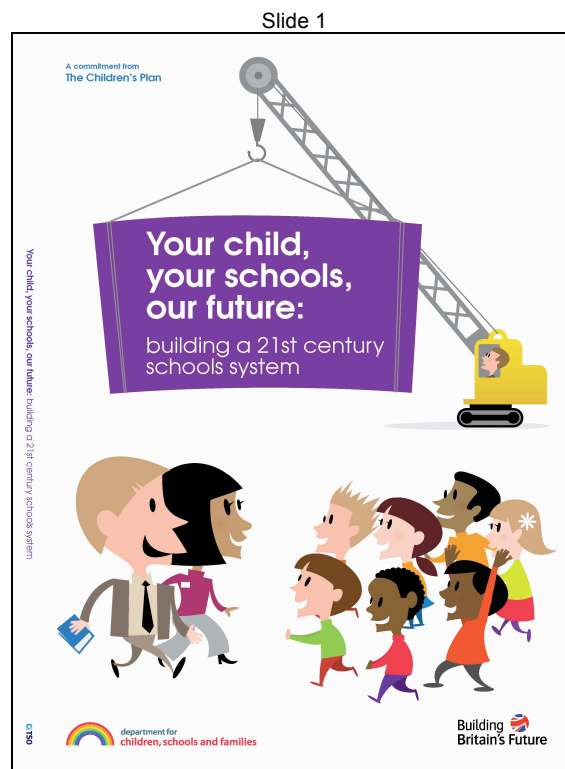
# 'WORLD CLASS SCHOOLS' – NOBLE ASPIRATION OR GLOBALISED HOKUM?

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In one of yesterday's sessions, Keith Lewin asked, as a test of how far nations practice what they preach in respect of universal EFA challenges like access, enrolment, retention, quality, equity and governance: 'What do rich countries do?' One thing that some of them do is to become obsessed with league tables to the exclusion of all else. Yes, I'm going to be a little bit provocative, but only because the issues are so serious. And although my starting point is Britain, the perspective is international, and I believe that it fits the conference theme of *Politics, Policies and Progress*.

*Building a 21<sup>st</sup> century schools system* [slide 1] is the sub-title of the recent white paper in which the UK government sets out its education priorities for the next few years.<sup>1</sup> I like that '21<sup>st</sup> century': it reassures me that in the year 2009 other political parties might be so confused that they build school systems for the 13<sup>th</sup> century, or the 35<sup>th</sup>, but not New Labour - they know what century we are in. The image is interesting too. Forget the 'school in a box', as developed by UNICEF or by our friends at Rishi Valley in Andhra Pradesh: now you can have an entire school system in a container, and this one is about to be dropped on these unsuspecting children and their parents. A reminder, perhaps, of the power of a centralised education system to crush those who don't comply? Surely not.



<sup>1</sup> DCSF (2009) *Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future: building a 21<sup>st</sup> century schools system*, London: DCSF.



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.<sup>4</sup>

We also know that the long tail of under-achievement, which offsets England's ranking in the international achievement surveys, maps with considerable precision onto the demography of income, unemployment, health, physical risk and ethnicity. In these terms, Ed Balls' aim simultaneously to raise the standards of education *and* childhood well-being is indeed a noble aspiration, and in the Cambridge Primary Review we found that government initiatives like the Children's Plan and Narrowing the Gap project were widely supported.<sup>5</sup>

But BAICE is a British association, not an English one, and it is dedicated to the advancement of international and comparative education, as is this conference as a whole. So I'm not going to dwell overmuch on the educational policies of the country in which the conference happens to be taking place. Anyway, it's clear that the British government's aspiration to be 'world class' is shared by many other countries, and indeed is an essential aspect of the rhetoric of globalisation. But I do want to 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 return, by way of case study, to a publication which has attracted considerable attention recently and which bears the characteristic title *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top*, otherwise known as the McKinsey report.<sup>6</sup> As a blueprint for educational reform and the achievement of world-class schools, the McKinsey report on education was embraced with a degree of official enthusiasm which was matched only by the speed with which, just two weeks ago, politicians of all parties rejected the McKinsey report on health. Note that British National Health Service has also been infected by the 'world-class' bug (if you'll pardon the metaphor). 'World class commissioning,' we are told, 'will be the delivery vehicle for world class clinical services and a world class NHS.'<sup>7</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>8</sup> It's in the category of meaningless slogans that we might place the stated aim of England's Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA), 'to develop a modern, world class curriculum that will inspire and challenge all learners and prepare them for the future.'<sup>9</sup> 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 in English schools who would find this closer to their experience.

Even more globally vibrant is this, from the website of another government-funded national body, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL):

The NCSL will host a conference advising head teachers how to achieve 'world class schools' this month. On March 9 at Chelsea Football Club the seminar entitled 'Achieving world class schools: the importance of schools business managers' will take place. The NCSL is collaborating with the Training and Development Agency for Schools to deliver the one-day-long, international conference, which follows on from

<sup>4</sup> Karen Dunnell, head of the Office for National Statistics, reported in *The Guardian*, 3 April 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2009) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, London: Routledge.

<sup>6</sup> Barber, M. and Mourshed, M. (2007) *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top*, Dubai, McKinsey and Company.

<sup>7</sup> Britnell, M. (2007) 'World class commissioning: NHS sets out to lead the world, *Health Service Journal*, 8 November

<sup>8</sup> Wolf, A. (2002) *Does Education Matter? Myths about education and economic growth*, London: Penguin.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.qcda.gov.uk/8665.aspx>

the success of last year's event, on the same theme.<sup>10</sup>

Leaving aside the happy notion that world class status can be achieved in just one month, and the invasion of Chelsea Football Club's hallowed turf by school business managers, we might ask why, if last year's event was so successful, it needed to be repeated. Of course, the main thing about this advertisement is that it presses all the right buttons: world class, international, clear solutions and models imported from the world of business.

I leave it to you to judge, when I have finished, what if anything 'world class' amounts to, and whether the word 'hokum' in this lecture's title is justified. Naturally, I've appended a question mark to the title, as academics always do – whether to cover their backs or disguise their polemical intent. But let's first look at the phenomenon in greater detail.

### International usage

In fact, 'world class' is now much more than a slogan. All of us who work at British universities have recently been through the mill of having our research output judged 'recognised nationally', 'recognised internationally', 'internationally excellent' or 'world leading'; and this produces yet more league tables. A place in the THES-QS 'top 100 universities' ranking is eagerly sought. In 2008 the field was led by Harvard, Yale, Cambridge, Oxford, Caltech and Imperial.<sup>11</sup> In the Shanghai 'top 500' list the front-runners were Harvard, Stanford, Berkeley, Cambridge, MIT and Caltech.<sup>12</sup> 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 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.<sup>13</sup> Never mind that Canada was 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: world class universities are what matter most.

But, as I've noted, 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 2007. In that discrepancy may lie uncomfortable truths about what money cannot 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. So in his 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 haven't by now adopted the term 'world class', often in bafflingly diverse ways. Go to Australia, Canada, New Zealand – 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?' pleads the *Toronto Globe and Mail*.

But pursue 'world-class' across linguistic boundaries and you'll find something else. On German websites the recurring phrase *Weltklasse Erziehung* - world class education - turns out to be a translation of President Obama's same nomination acceptance speech. On Russian websites, references to world class education take you to the World Bank's attempts to encourage the 'modernisation' of Russian schools and universities on western lines. It

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.tda.gov.uk/about/directnews/2008/03/05/NCSL>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.topuniversities.com/university\\_rankings/results/2008/overall\\_rankings/top\\_100\\_universities/](http://www.topuniversities.com/university_rankings/results/2008/overall_rankings/top_100_universities/)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.arwu.org/rank2008/EN2008.htm>

<sup>13</sup> The Economist (2009) *The Economist Pocket World in Figures 2009* London: Profile Books.

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

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

American cable television magnate Glenn Jones may well be right that education is now the biggest market in the world. It’s in that knowledge that education systems find themselves competing to secure market dominance in terms of the best students and researchers, and it’s why they feel obliged to frame their outcomes as tightly-focussed and marketable skills rather pursue than old-fashioned notions of a broad and liberal education. ‘“Economically valuable skills” is our mantra’, says the 2007 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; and many or most of Britain’s university vice-chancellors now happily repeat the mantra.<sup>14</sup>

Yet the 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 UN Human Development Index 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>15</sup>. 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’:

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 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 shared vision.<sup>16</sup>

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

Then, familiar to everyone here, there are those league tables that fill the second half of UNESCO’s annual Education for All (EFA) global monitoring reports, now in its seventh edition, and which track the world’s halting progress towards the UN Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education by 2015;<sup>17</sup> 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, I have absolutely no doubt that the discussion of EFA is vastly

<sup>14</sup> HM Treasury (2006) *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy: world class skills*, London: TSO.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Development Programme (2008) *Fighting Climate Change: human solidarity in a divided world* (Human Development Report 2007/8), UNDP.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>17</sup> UNESCO (2008) *Overcoming Inequality: why governance matters*, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009, Paris/Oxford: UNESCO and Oxford University Press.

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 to a concept of citizenship which is global rather than merely national.

Thus, for example, this 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.<sup>18</sup>

I'm aware of the reservations of those like Lynn Davies who ask whether 'global citizenship' may be just too vast and abstract a concept for useful purchase at classroom level.<sup>19</sup> It's 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,<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> Yet there's clearly a danger that global citizenship, like education for sustainability, will satisfy a feel-good requirement but achieve little else.

### The pedigree 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 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, in which I was involved, 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.<sup>22</sup> 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

<sup>18</sup> Scottish Government (2008) *Curriculum for Excellence*, <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/curriculumforexcellence>

<sup>19</sup> Davies, L. (2006) 'Global Citizenship: abstraction or framework for action?' *Educational Review* 58(1), 5-25

<sup>20</sup> Alexander, R.J. (ed) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Abingdon: Routledge, chapter 12.

<sup>21</sup> Deakin Crick, R., Taylor, M., Ritchie, S., Samuel, E., Durant, K. (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.

<sup>22</sup> Alexander, R.J., Rose, J. and Woodhead, C. (1992) *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools: a discussion paper*, London, DES.

goals, the 1994 *Educate America Act* 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' ringing 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.<sup>23</sup> Published in 1996, 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 in its turn sounded proper notes of caution but then 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 have called the 'discipline' of school effectiveness research.

In 1996 I published a detailed critique of the Ofsted study, and the ISERP school effectiveness project on which it draws, and I have since elaborated that critique.<sup>24</sup> I don't 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.'
- Culture - which I suspect in the view of most of us here 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 actually 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

<sup>23</sup> Reynolds, D., Farrell, S. (1996) *Worlds Apart? A Review of International Surveys of Educational Achievement Involving England*, London: OFSTED.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander, R.J. (2008) *Essays on Pedagogy*, Abingdon: Routledge, chapter 2.

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.<sup>25</sup>

There is certainly a problem - which Angela Little noted from her systematic analysis of the comparative literature a few years ago - of a preponderance of one-country studies which aren't 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 - we can mention Harold Noah, Philip Altbach, Patricia Broadfoot, David Phillips, Michael Crossley, Angela Little, Bob Cowen and many more - and it is clear that comparativists are as interested as the next person in cause, consequence and 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.<sup>26</sup> It was a grave, even epic omission. But it's 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. [Slide 4] 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.<sup>27</sup>

Slide 4

**Comparative studies in education**  
(BICSE 2003)

**Type 1 studies:** large-scale surveys comparing educational outcomes across countries.

**Type 2 studies:** comparative studies of specific topics, commissioned to inform particular education policies.

**Type 3 studies:** directed at furthering understanding of educational processes in different cultural contexts; not necessarily policy or outcome directed.

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 (*Worlds Apart*, 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

<sup>25</sup> Reynolds and Farrell, *op cit*, p 53.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander, R.J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy*, Oxford: Blackwell.

<sup>27</sup> National Research Council (2003) *Understanding Others, Educating Ourselves: getting more from international comparative studies in education*, Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, p 13.



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.<sup>28</sup>

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 the Ofsted *Worlds Apart* report, we might ask whether those who work within this paradigm have modified their position, perhaps heeding the conclusion of the BICSE report. Sadly, the answer would appear to be a resounding 'no'. In their later book *World Class Schools: international perspectives on school effectiveness*, Reynolds and his colleagues move 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 [OK, we get the message – we are simpletons] ... 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.<sup>29</sup>

Once an academic resorts to *ad hominem* attacks you know he or she has nowhere else to go. If comparativists try to understand the character and power of context and culture, it's 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. As I pointed out in an article published eight years ago:

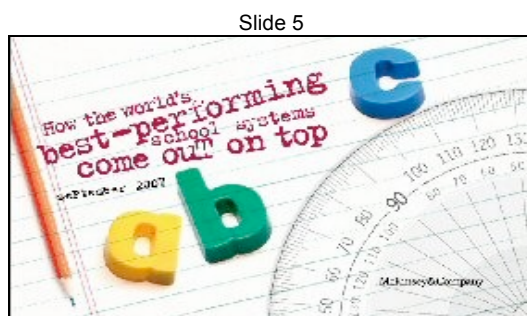
Cultural borrowing happens; it has always happened. Few countries remain hermetically sealed in the development of their educational systems, and for centuries there has been a lively international traffic in educational ideas and practices. So, for example, Pestalozzi mingles with Tagore, Krishnamurti and the Elmhursts 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

<sup>28</sup> National Research Council (2003) *op cit*, pp 23-4.

<sup>29</sup> Reynolds, D., Creemers, B., Stringfield, S., Teddlie, C., Schaffer, G. (2002) *World Class Schools: international perspectives on school effectiveness*, London: Routledge, pp 287-8.

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.<sup>30</sup>

And so onwards, upwards or backwards to the 2007 report, *How the best-performing school systems come out on top* [slide 5], from the multi-national management consultancy McKinsey. It is difficult not to be influenced by the report's physical format, though I shall try. It's 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. Its design appears to celebrate, as the criterion for 'coming out on top', barely-functional literacy.



Inside, as in *Worlds Apart*, the baseline for McKinsey's comparative analysis is the international student achievement survey, and though culture is acknowledged it is then 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.<sup>31</sup>

The quest for universals in education is an interesting and I believe necessary one. Certainly it informed the comparative study of primary education in England, France, India, Russia and the United States which I undertook during the 1990s.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

I don't know how much this report cost – McKinsey charged the UK taxpayer £1.27 million

<sup>30</sup> Alexander, R.J. (2001) 'Border Crossings: towards a comparative pedagogy', *Comparative Education*, 37(4), 507-23

<sup>31</sup> Barber and Mourshed (2007) *op cit*, p 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Culture and Pedagogy*.

<sup>33</sup> Barber and Mourshed (2007) *op cit*, p 2.

for the report on health service reform which the government rejected a couple of weeks ago, so no doubt the McKinsey study of world class schools cost something similar. But I'm 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.<sup>34</sup>

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 isn't 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 not going to discuss teaching or define quality.' What kind of an explanation is that?

For the rest, I'm afraid it's the familiar story. Here are three further examples of the fundamental frailty of this recent and 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.<sup>35</sup>

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?<sup>36</sup> What raises standards is good teaching. But then McKinsey opts not to discuss teaching. Oh dear.

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

<sup>34</sup> Barber and Mourshed (2007) *op cit*, p 8.

<sup>35</sup> Barber and Mourshed (2007) *op cit*, p 36.

<sup>36</sup> Harlen, W. (2009) 'The quality of learning: assessment alternatives for primary education', in R.J.Alexander with C.Doddington, J.Gray, L.Hargreaves and R.Kershner (ed), *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Abingdon: Routledge, chapter 19.

the conditions under which improvement can occur.<sup>37</sup>

The comparison is interesting: Singapore's school system has just 351 schools to England's 20,000, so in this particular context does the comparison have any point? Even more interesting is the claim about 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 expert advisers to the Cambridge Primary Review to suggest that England now has a 'state theory of learning'.<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

I defy you to persuade me that this means anything at all, or at least anything worth thinking about. There are many other examples.

### **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 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 isn't, '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 at country level here 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 which 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.

<sup>37</sup> Barber and Mourshed (2007) *op cit*, p 40.

<sup>38</sup> Balarin, M. and Lauder, H. (2009) 'The governance and administration of English primary education', in R.J.Alexander with C.Doddington, J.Gray, L.Hargreaves and R.Kershner (ed) *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 733-50.

<sup>39</sup> Barber and Mourshed (2007) *op cit*, p 30.

- The enterprise as a whole, inevitably, 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 more generously illuminate their understanding of what they are researching, as commended by BICSE.
- 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 world-views ought to meet in a recognition of the inseparability of education from other aspects of national life, but they don't. 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 world-views encounter acute difficulties in relation to what we mean by the *quality* of education. In the first tradition, quality actually doesn't 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 don't think that in the development context we've 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.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

For those interested in cause and effect and the so-called drivers and levers of educational improvement, here are two further thoughts.

First, [slide 6] commentaries on Finland's remarkable though recent dominance of the student achievement league tables highlights factors such as these: reform efforts aimed at reducing qualitative differences between schools; relative cultural homogeneity; low rates of immigration; a well-motivated and educated teaching force; high levels of student interest and engagement with reading outside school; a paramount commitment to educational equity; 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>41</sup>

Slide 6

**How does Finland do it?**

Lyytinen (2002) and Fredriksson (2006)

- Minimal qualitative differences between schools.
- Relative cultural homogeneity.
- Low rates of immigration.
- Teaching force well-motivated and well-trained.
- Engagement and interest in reading as the cultural norm.
- Paramount commitment to educational equity.
- Late start to formal schooling and thorough preparation at pre-school stage for social, linguistic and study demands of school.
- Decentralised decision-making.
- High degree of institutional and professional autonomy.

We have to acknowledge that there are not many countries which combine all these features. Equally, it's striking that the McKinsey report makes very little of most of these in explaining

<sup>40</sup> The problem of indicators and measures of quality in the context of EFA, especially in the domain of pedagogy, is explored in Alexander, R.J. (2008) *Education for All, the Quality Imperative and the Problem of Pedagogy*, CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph 20, London: CREATE.

<sup>41</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.

how countries like Finland ‘come out on top’, other than the motivation and education of teachers. But then, some are politically sensitive and must therefore be avoided (like the starting age for formal schooling) while others are in the unmeasurable domain of culture.

Second, [slide 7] if you look at Ruzzi’s 2006 synthesis of all the international achievement survey results from 1995 to 2003, you’ll find that at the top of the combined league table there is disproportionate representation from countries which – like Finland - have small populations and are relatively homogenous culturally and linguistically. If you take the 19 countries which between them take the top 12 places in reading, maths and science, their average population is just 18.1 million. Remove Japan, the one country in the list with a large population, and that average national population drops to 12.1 million, which in global terms is truly minute.<sup>42</sup> 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 this simple level that’s what you might conclude.

Slide 7

<b>Ranking of countries participating in international student achievement surveys, grade 8 and above, 1995-2003 (Ruzzi 2006)</b>			
	<b>Top in reading</b>	<b>Top in mathematics</b>	<b>Top in science</b>
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

Yes, of course this is grossly simplistic. Yet take the case of the United States, which has a modest showing in these league tables despite its immense wealth. It has a population of over 300 million, is culturally highly diverse and politically and administratively is decentralised so that there is considerable variation in educational policy and provision. It also has 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.

The McKinsey report rightly says ‘The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.’<sup>43</sup> But remember also Ernest Boyer, quoted by Harold Noah: ‘A report card on public education is a report card on the nation. Schools can rise no higher than the communities that support them.’<sup>44</sup>

Finally, where does all this leave an organisation like BAICE? What I have said today 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 in this conference is a testament to such

<sup>42</sup> Ruzzi, B.B. (2006) *International education tests: an overview, 2005*, Washington, NCEE.

<sup>43</sup> Barber and Mourshed (2007) *op cit*, p 40.

<sup>44</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.

convergence, or at least the hope that it can be achieved. But other divisions are less readily bridged. There's the aggressively-defended barrier between the international school effectiveness movement and mainstream comparative research which I have discussed. There's the gulf between the versions of 'world class' which I've also discussed, between education for supremacy and education for viability, interdependence, sustainability and survival. If the issue really is survival, then this gulf needs to be bridged, and urgently.

Finally, there's the gap between national and international consciousness in the wider education community. It's 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 publishes its final report on the condition and future of English primary education next month, we have 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.<sup>45</sup> I try, in my small way, to do this in my own work: my book *Essays on Pedagogy* doesn't have the words 'global', 'international' or 'comparative' in its title but nevertheless strives to be all of these and draws heavily on comparative and international data and literature.<sup>46</sup> What is required, in the context of globalisation, migration, poverty, inequality, cultural fluidity, geo-political 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's from that consciousness that truly world class education comes, and this takes us into the vital 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've 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.

May I thank BAICE for honouring me with its Presidency and for inviting me to give this address. I only regret that the Cambridge Primary Review has prevented me from participating more actively during the past year.<sup>47</sup> I wish the Association, and UKFIET, and all of you, the success which your missions so richly deserve.

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<sup>45</sup> Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2009) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>46</sup> Alexander, R.J. (2008) *Essays on Pedagogy*, Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>47</sup> The Cambridge Primary Review is a politically and financially independent investigation into the condition of English primary education. Funded by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, it is the most comprehensive such enquiry since the Plowden Report of 1967. It was launched in October 2006, published 31 interim reports between October 2007 and February 2009, and in October 2009 publishes its final report (see note 45). For further information: [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk).