

PISA in purdah

Roy Blatchford

December 2019

With politicians on doorsteps and civil servants in purdah, this month's publication of PISA results has not been accompanied by the usual idle chatter around rising and falling standards.

OECD's PISA tests have been running since 2000. They measure the ability of 15 year-olds to apply their skills and knowledge to real life problem-solving in reading, maths and science.

The rankings are based on samples of pupils in each country, with about 600,000 pupils having taken this round of tests.

In the latest league table – based on results for the tests taken in 2018 - China, Singapore, Macau and Hong Kong continue to lead maths and reading rankings. In science the same countries dominate, with Estonia rising to join the top table. Canada and Finland are up there too, as they have been for a number of years.

As to the UK:

- in reading, the UK is 14th, up from 22nd in the previous tests three years ago
- in science, the UK is 14th, up from 15th
- in maths, the UK is 18th, up from 27th.

These figures are based on a sample of about 14,000 pupils in 460 schools.

If government and opposition politicians were to be speaking on these results, claims and counter-claims would doubtless be made for the impact of phonics and mastery maths, academies and increased funding in classrooms.

A more sober analysis lies with Andreas Schleicher, the OECD's education director, who said there were 'positive signals' from the UK's results which showed 'modest improvements'. He went on to say that at the current rate of progress it would take a 'very long time' for the UK to catch up with the highest achieving countries.

So what is the UK not doing that the 'top table' are?

I met recently a group of undergraduates studying education at the University of Reading. Many come from the countries which feature at the top of the PISA league. They argue strongly that culture trumps systems, that the esteem in which the teacher is held in their societies is *the* determining factor alongside the value placed on education by parents. Tutoring outside school also plays a part they suggested.

These undergrads spoke eloquently about the expectations which *all* teachers have that *all* children will succeed. Mixed-ability classes are the norm, as they are in Estonia. The results from China are calculated from just four of its provinces with a combined population of 180 million. Even the most deprived 10% of pupils in these provinces had better results than the average for the UK.

The reasons to be cheerful about our own education system are that many, many children and young people succeed academically and enjoy school, though OECD in a linked survey observed that UK teenagers were found to have among the lowest levels of 'life satisfaction'.

Do we take from all this that the 'long tail of under-achievement' – [*the forgotten third*](#) – casts a shadow over UK education that we need to focus on in a fresh, radical, new-look way?

Ask a group of primary headteachers and they say that reducing class sizes would make a significant difference to attainment at 11+. Ask a group of secondary headteachers and they will say that a system of comparable outcomes, which fails a third of students in order that two-thirds can pass, presents a fundamental flaw in our GCSE examination system.

Dig a little deeper into how the 'top table' countries organize things, and examinations at 16+ are a feature of the past when the vast majority of young people are in education and training to at least 18+. Not to mention trusting teachers to assess their own students, externally verified.

And ask folk in Canada or Finland about the balance between school accountability and school support, and they find the Ofsted model (albeit slowly shifting) an alien force.

In summary, we shall not see the UK in the top PISA ranks in the coming decades unless there is a seismic shift in how society values education and teachers.

And in how the profession works with government to challenge the accepted orthodoxy that failure for a third is *baked* into our system. The Chinese, Japanese, French, Indian, Libyan, etc. undergraduates I spoke to cannot believe we do this. Why would you? Why do we?

[OECD Programme for International Student Assessment \(PISA\)](#)