



Fair
Education
Alliance



Building a World Leading Education System that is Fair

A collection of essays from members of the Fair
Education Alliance

Foreword by Sir Richard Lambert

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OUR VISION

The Fair Education Alliance is **working towards a world where our education system is fair** – where children’s educational success is not limited by their socio-economic background.

This is a world where **disadvantage no longer determines literacy and numeracy** rates at primary school, **GCSE attainment** at secondary school, the emotional **wellbeing and resilience** of young people, participation in **further education** or employment based training and **university graduation**.

OUR MISSION

To use our **collective voice and influence** to **create change** by helping a wide range of stakeholders to **close the gap** between the most disadvantaged children and their wealthier peers.

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Jess Tanner and Miranda Dobson, Family Links
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Foreword by Sir Richard Lambert



International benchmarks show that the academic standards of 15 year-old students in the UK are average at best when compared with those of their peers overseas. This is despite the fact that the UK invests significantly more per head than others in student education; that the peer group includes countries with very much higher poverty rates than the UK; and that this country has a sizeable cohort of world-class schools leading the pack.

This was the depressing conclusion of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) undertaken in 2012 by the OECD, the rich countries' club. When compared with previous PISA studies in 2006 and 2009, there had been no improvement in the UK's performance in any of the subjects tested. And the analysis for 2015, which is due to be published on December 6, is not expected to show any great change for the better.

This depressing performance is explained by our failure to deal with the long tail of underachievement from the poorest communities – the great national challenge which the Fair Education Alliance was set up to address. The last PISA survey showed that when it came to mathematics, the gap between the performance of the more advantaged students compared with their less well-off peers in this country was equivalent to roughly a full year of schooling, and rather wider than the OECD average.

This has serious consequences. It represents a shocking waste of talent that affects our productivity and competitiveness as an economy. As the OECD explains, nurturing excellence in mathematics, reading and science “is crucial for a country's development as these students will be in the vanguard of a competitive, knowledge-based global economy”.

Educational inequalities also strain social cohesion, and are at least part of the explanation for the political turmoil now being experienced in parts of Europe and in the US.

If we do not act with speed to close these gaps, our country risks becoming an underachieving offshore island which in the next decade or two will watch much of the rest of the world go racing by. The Prime Minister, rightly, acknowledges this and the government's decision to place social mobility at the heart of its agenda is a welcome one. In particular, the

announcement of greater investment in “new opportunity areas” has the potential to act as a real catalyst for change.

PISA looks at the extent to which 15 year-old students in a large number of relatively developed countries have acquired the knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in modern societies. The assessments focus on reading, maths, and science, and look both at what students know – and at what they can do with what they know. Problem solving is an important part of the analysis.

In the 2012 study, the UK came in at number 26 out of the 65 countries and regions in the league table, bang in line with the OECD average. This put it roughly alongside France and ahead of the US – but way behind countries like Korea and Japan.

Switzerland, the Netherlands, Finland and Germany were among the European countries that were well ahead of the UK, while soaring away at the very top of the league table were Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taipei.

Among other things, the data show that some countries are more successful than the UK in reducing the influence of socio-economic status on student performance. They also make it absolutely clear that it is possible to combine high performance with high levels of equity in education. In Europe, countries like Switzerland, the Netherlands and Finland perform noticeably better than the UK in this respect.

One explanation is that school systems in these countries tend to allocate resources more equitably than others between advantaged and disadvantaged institutions.

Proponents of grammar schools will not take any comfort from the PISA numbers. They show that stratification in school systems, the result of policies like grade repetition or selecting students at a young age for different types of school, is negatively related to equity – and that students in highly stratified systems tend to be less motivated than others.

And motivation matters. The Fair Education Alliance is committed to ensuring that young people develop key strengths, including character, wellbeing and mental health, to support high aspirations. PISA only touches lightly on this important issue, by highlighting the percentage of students who reported being happy at school. Top of the list, rather surprisingly, are Indonesia, Albania and Peru – all laggards in the skills assessment. The UK comes in just a bit above the OECD average.

Young people with low education levels fare particularly badly in the UK labour market. A separate OECD study, published earlier this year, showed that nearly two-fifths of young people who left school before completing upper secondary school are not in employment, education or training (NEET) compared to under a tenth of those with a third level qualification. This is one of the largest gaps in the OECD. Just over 25 per cent of 16 to 19 year olds in England and Northern Ireland have low numeracy skills, compared to an OECD average of 15 per cent.

And the really grim fact is that this is one of the very few countries in which older workers appear to have greater literacy and numeracy skills than their younger peers. Skills tend to decline with age, so absent some positive intervention, this means that the UK's overall stock of skills is set to deteriorate in the decades to come. This is something that ought to be front and centre in the minds of our political, academics and business leaders. It represents an existential threat to the prosperity and wellbeing of our country.

The essays in this collection look at different pathways towards addressing this challenge. They bring together the views of FEA members on the five goals of the Alliance, which are to narrow the gap in literacy and numeracy at ordinary school; to do the same for GCSE attainment at secondary school; to develop key strengths like character and wellbeing; to get more young people into further education or employment-based training after finishing their GCSEs; and to improve access to higher education for all students.

We finish this collection with a summary of the FEA recommendations: our mission is to see these incorporated into the political manifestos of all the main parties. And the PISA data to be published on December 6 will underline why this challenge is of the utmost importance to the future of the United Kingdom.



Sir Richard Lambert
Chair of the Fair Education Alliance

Solid foundations – improving educational attainment by investing in children’s early years.

Claire Read, Save the Children

England’s education system has many strengths. It is still the envy of much of the world, and has improved in recent decades as schools have added a commitment to closing the gap to a tradition of high standards. Despite the challenges of teaching, the profession is still full of bright and inspiring people that are dedicated to changing children’s lives.

Results are also improving; despite small year on year fluctuations in pass rates, standards are higher now than they were ten or twenty years ago. More children are leaving primary school with a good level of literacy and maths. The number of children with five good GCSEs is also on a general upwards trajectory, and progression to higher and further education has remained high, despite increased tuition fees and funding reductions.

Yet, the reality underneath this progress is that there are still too many children for whom the system does not work. These are the children who do not master the skills they need, and who go into adulthood being told that they have failed. And this is more likely to happen to children who grow up in poverty, in certain parts of the country or from certain backgrounds. Despite its many strengths, our education system doesn’t work for everyone, and for many children the circumstances under which you grow up still determine whether or not it does.

This is at the heart of why our PISA results do not reflect the many strengths of our education system. As long as there are whole groups of children who are not benefitting from these improvements, and an ingrained inequality of outcomes persists, we will stay outside the educational top flight.

To change this, we need to look at children’s early years. It is in the first five years of life that the crucial foundations are laid, upon which so much is built, including how well children do at primary and secondary school.

The pace of reform in the primary and secondary sector has, in recent years, been heady. Everything from curriculum and exam content, to the way we train teachers and the funding system has been radically reformed, often at dizzying speed. Yet, we spend very little time focusing on the crucial time before children arrive at formal school. This is where early education and childcare can lay good foundations, igniting a love of learning and equipping

children with the skills they need to get the most out of school when they get there. For this reason, a good start is absolutely crucial for later attainment.

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This is, in part, due to the neurological development that goes on in children's brains in their first five years. A fully-grown adult brain has an estimated 86 billion neurons, but the majority of them are actually formed in the womb.^{1a1b} During infancy, the connections between neurons become stronger and more extensive, with new ones forming. It is these synapse connections that allow us to move, communicate and recall memories. At age two neural connections are being formed about twice as fast as in an adult's brain, and are the basis of children's educational development.² This happens at a staggering pace - an average of 700 new synapse connections per second³, bringing with them the development of key learning skills such as memory.

Once a child reaches three, the rapid growth in the size of their brain and in the formation of these connections begin to slow^{4a4b}, and a fine-tuning process known by experts as 'synaptic pruning' begins. This is where neural connections are refined, based on the child's environment and stimulation, to enhance the efficiency and strength of the most important brain networks⁵. Connections that are least relevant to the child's environment are lost, while those that are important grow more efficient and complex.

It is easy to see how a child in a high quality, stimulating and engaging environment in their early years will benefit during this process. Children who are supported by positive early environments and experiences are more likely to keep and strengthen the connections related to key learning-related skills such as concentration, numbers and counting, communication, and fine motor skills. Of course, we retain the ability to develop these skills throughout our lives, but the evidence shows that as time goes on, brain circuits become increasingly difficult to change.⁶ Parents, carers and the home environment are vital to children during this process, and are some of the biggest influencers on the brain development that occurs at this age. High-quality early education and childcare can also help to support the early development of young children, and have a proven impact on outcomes. The EPPE study (Effective Provision of Pre-School Education) and related literature contains some of the most important evidence in this area. This project proved that early education and childcare can have a profound and lasting impact on a child's development, particularly for children growing up in poverty.⁷

In the years since EPPE, many studies have explored the nuances of the positive impact of early education, including proving that it is particularly beneficial for children growing up in poverty.⁸ The evidence also concludes, crucially, that for early education to have this positive impact, childcare needs to be of a sufficiently high quality to support children's early development.⁹ That the quality of provision must be high may seem like an obvious truth, and there is a huge body of evidence behind it, yet it has not had the cut through it warrants in recent educational reform debate. School infrastructure and funding, curriculum reform, Free Schools and academisation have dominated airtime and investment. Much of the government's recent focus for childcare policy has been on reducing costs to parents. Although there have been some important reforms on quality, it has not always been top of the political agenda. As a result, the early years sector has been neglected and its potential to improve outcomes is often overlooked in favour of further reforms to the school sector. This is having a tangible impact on our children and young people.

In 2015/16, one in three children (31 %) began KS1 without having reached a good level of early development. That is more than 200,000 children who struggled with their language and communication skills, social and emotional development or physical development. The poverty gap starts here too; disadvantaged children are overrepresented in the number of children falling behind in key skills. And falling behind blights childhoods; it is frustrating and upsetting to struggle to understand simple words or phrases, express yourself, play with other children or not have the dexterity needed for everyday tasks.

Starting school behind also has a huge impact on later educational attainment; it can be difficult to catch up, particularly if a child does not have a solid basis from their time in early education. Recent research by the University of Bristol found that being behind in early language and communication at the age of five had a negative impact on all the outcomes measured at 11 in the dataset they considered (the Millennium Cohort Study). Children who were behind at five were found to be over four times more likely to still be behind at eleven.¹⁰

The impact of being behind in the early years can also be traced into teenage years and adulthood. Young adults without strong language skills in early childhood have been found to run an increased risk of being not in education, employment or training (NEET) at age 16-18.¹¹ Research has found that children's vocabulary scores at age five are associated with their literacy as adults at age 34 and that those who had difficulties with language at age five were at a higher risk of experiencing mental health issues.¹² The effect has also been found to run the other way round – good support in the early years is beneficial right into adulthood: children with a good language ability at age five are more likely to have both higher qualifications and to be in employment in adulthood compared to their peers.¹³

This is but a small selection of some of the evidence in this area – to do it full justice would take an entire volume. Even this snapshot of the literature shows that there is huge potential to be harnessed in raising the quality of the early years, investing early in our children and building solid foundations. These will have a knock-on effect on primary, secondary and PISA results and ultimately the life chances of children across the country. But how to go about it?

The evidence is clear that it is the quality of early education that is crucial for outcomes. The government has a central role in strengthening this quality of provision for two reasons. First in its domestic policy remit to improve outcomes, life chances and the value for money of the education system. Second as the biggest single purchaser of childcare due to the free entitlements for every three and four year old. The fact that nearly all three and four year olds, and sizable proportions of younger children, access some form of early education or childcare provision means that improving that provision is a huge opportunity for change.

The way that the market is structured, with a large proportion of childcare being ‘bought’ at centrally-set rates by the government to fulfil its promise of 15 free hours a week per child, also has the opportunity to improve quality. To deliver an outstanding early years system the rate at which the government ‘buys’ childcare must be sufficient, particularly given that the free entitlement is doubling for children in working families next September.

There has recently been extra investment announced by the government, which has been welcomed. It may not, however, even be a real terms increase given that the government has not increased the level of funding it pays since at least 2010, while inflation, energy and premises costs, the introduction of the living wage and auto enrolment for pensions have, and will continue to, increase running costs for early years providers. This lack of real-terms funding growth and increasing financial pressure ultimately limits the capacity of the sector to support children and improve outcomes.

One of the reasons that the rate of funding is so crucial is that it has a huge influence on the quality of the workforce. Highly qualified staff are one of the biggest drivers of childcare quality, as shown by multiple studies. It is just the same as in the schools sector – while there are many influences on outcomes, it is the quality of the workforce that is most important. The qualifications, skills and experience of all the staff in a childcare setting are critical for creating the nurturing learning environments in which young children thrive. Studies consistently show, however, that the presence of trained teachers and staff with relevant degree level qualifications in nurseries brings an added impact for a child’s early learning and

development, particularly for those growing up in poverty. Our ambition should be for every child to have access to an early years teacher.

Highly qualified staff are one of the biggest drivers of childcare quality.

Yet there has been no strong focus on increasing the number of early years teachers in recent years. There is a foundation upon which to build: the Coalition Government introduced a new qualification for early years teachers and invested in developing new training courses, and the current government has repeatedly promised a workforce strategy for the sector next year. However, there are significant concerns about the number of early years teacher status trainees, some issues with recruiting sufficient numbers of level three practitioners and delays to the publication of the workforce strategy. The last workforce strategy was published back in 2008, the Graduate Leader Fund that provided funding for settings to hire level six staff, has been removed, and the recent funding consultation failed to make specific funding available for workforce improvement – including for settings to hire trained teachers.

Combined with recent reductions to the local authority budgets that once funded training and developing staff, the early years workforce is under-supported. One of the impacts of this is that shockingly now only half of the three- and four-year-old children attending childcare in the private, voluntary and independent sector have access to an early years teacher.

We have a huge opportunity to improve outcomes by continuing to drive up the quality of childcare and early education in England. To seize it, the government must make it a priority to invest in the early years workforce. We need improved entrance routes, better support for continuing professional development and clear progression options for existing staff.

This will be challenging, but so worthwhile. Only by investing in the workforce, and in a sustainable funding base, will we continue to improve the quality of early education, and deliver the proven benefits for children. Those benefits are tangible and far-reaching – investing in the early years is a real chance to improve outcomes at all levels of education. It will be a bonus that this should help improve our PISA rankings; the real prize will be improving the lives of children and young people and doing justice to an education system that has so many inspiring strengths.

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Is England closing the maths gap? A reflection on PISA 2015

Dr Catherine Knowles, Achievement for All

Fifteen year olds are adrift in the sea of mathematics tested by PISA if they did not get the basic grounding in pre-school and primary. The four areas of mathematics tested by PISA are: space and shape, quantity, uncertainty and data and change and relationships. These are the areas that children should be introduced to at a young age if the attainment gap is to close. Since 2006, 15 year olds in the UK have fared badly in the PISA mathematics rankings in comparison to their peers across many of the other OECD countries and economies. Yet the UK, with a higher than average GDP, spends more on education than many of these countries. Unlike many other OECD countries, young people from immigrant families in the UK generally perform as well as or better than their peers. At the same time, the attainment gap between those from socio-economic disadvantage and their more advantaged peers is greater in the UK than in other OECD countries. This means, those from poor white British families in the UK, particularly boys, are leaving school without the basic qualifications in maths (and reading) needed for work. The chances are these young people have probably spent the same amount of time in mathematics classes as their more advantaged peers; but because of ability setting, a system widely used in England for mathematics (less frequently for other subjects), they will have had less exposure to core mathematical concepts- equations or functions for example- than their more advantaged peers. This can put them as much as two years behind other children who have spent their maths lessons figuring out the concepts of algebra or geometry.¹

This year, the PISA mathematics rankings show a slightly better picture for England. Is this a sign that the mathematics landscape is changing? What this picture tells us is that in some areas, in some schools, young people are being given opportunities for higher level maths, with good teaching. The majority of these students will be in the higher or middle performing groups, which means the attainment gap is getting wider. These same young people are also more likely to have had good mathematics opportunities and teaching in early education and primary school.

Primary schools in England, which are getting it right, are focusing on 'pre-teaching' (children spending time with a teacher before the lesson to go over a concept they failed to grasp in the previous lesson). Negative attitudes to maths - amongst staff, children and their parents - are forbidden and the development of number and number sense is central to lessons; in

some schools 75 % of maths lessons are devoted to numbers. Focused teacher CPD is a central characteristic.

In the best of these schools, the profile of maths has been raised, with opportunities for maths across subjects purposefully identified. Mathematical problems, language and calculations are displayed on classroom walls and in corridors, with Maths Week and Enterprise Week introduced to develop maths skills and financial literacy. This is reflected in the following comments made by the head of a primary school, which is closing the maths attainment gap for children from poor families:

'Many children come with a low starting point and we focus on the essentials for maths and consistency in approach- the same maths learning wall in every classroom; a focus on learning powers (i.e. what it takes to be a good learner). We teach the children to learn from mistakes and move on; it can be good to make mistakes. And we are constantly asking children to consider numbers- e.g. 365- how many ways can you get to 365?'

(Belfield Community school, Rochdale)

The focus on depth, in the new primary maths curriculum² is enabling many schools to move away from the idea of accelerated progress to the development of mathematical language and conceptual understanding; maths is frequently set within a real life context. Lessons start with a 'problem' and regular maths competitions across the school make it fun; the result is that primary school children in England are enjoying maths. These schools also see the importance of engaging parents in the process; they arrange workshops to help parents support their child's maths learning both at school and at home. For children from poor families this can have a significant impact on their outcomes.^{3a3b}

More and more primary schools in England are building on these foundations by adopting the maths mastery approach based on that used in Singapore and Shanghai. Encompassing three core elements- deep understanding (often accompanied by the concrete, pictorial, abstract approach), problem solving and success for all (high expectations), there is a focus on whole class teaching, using the same materials. Those likely to underachieve are exposed to the same rich maths experiences as their peers. This is reflected in the following comments, about children's success in maths and made by senior and middle leaders in schools using the mastery approach:

'A key factor of our success has been the good development of teacher subject knowledge, built up through ongoing and focused CPD. And with children we always start a lesson with a problem- not with objectives; so children are thinking from the very start of a lesson. We always look 'outside'; we have developed our approach to teacher research and have been involved with the Shanghai/Singapore maths mastery programme.... I always say to teachers that maths teaching can be based on the Hippocratic Oath of doctors- 'First do no harm'. We want everyone to be enjoying maths and happy doing maths'.

(Parkfield Primary School, Birmingham)

'Because they develop a deep understanding of key mathematical concepts. The new National Curriculum is good for that-it calls more for depth than breadth-with a focus on number, place value and calculation. These are the most important things to focus on and if the children get these, they have got it'.

(Hillside Avenue Primary and Nursery School, Norfolk)

Children begin school at the age of four or five with considerable differences in maths skills and understanding and those differences will continue to grow over their school careers if maths teaching and learning in the earliest years of education is not re-evaluated. In 2014/15, 34% of children from poor families failed to achieve the expected level in numeracy at the end of the early years foundation stage. This compares to 19% for their more advantaged peers.⁴ This situation is not inevitable. Evidence suggests that direct teaching methods for developing young children's mathematical concepts and skills are most effective. Underpinned by learning from approaches like Montessori, they allow for greater flexibility (teacher/practitioner) and a focus on the child's learning needs.⁵ Evidence from research with pre-school children in the Netherlands supports teacher (adult) managed or adult-directed activity for more positive outcomes in children's mathematical skills.⁶

Children begin school at the age of four or five with considerable differences in maths skills and understanding and those differences will continue to grow over their school careers if maths teaching and learning in the earliest years of education is not re-evaluated.

In essence, what these findings suggest is the importance of adult directed activities for the development of early mathematical skills in children, along with mathematical content and employment of child-centred activities if they are strongly supported by adults. These are important considerations for early years teachers and practitioners in England, where there is increasing focus on children's 'school readiness'. In this context, Ofsted⁷ strongly supported an adult-directed approach for children with developmental delay in early years.

Early years settings in England, which are closing the maths attainment gap for their disadvantaged children highlight the importance of raising the profile of maths, including bringing it into all activities, adapting the environment to focus on numeracy and building practitioner confidence through focused CPD.

The lack of an overly prescriptive Early Years Foundation Stage framework provides many opportunities for developing maths at setting level. Knowing each child - their strengths, areas for development and the things they enjoy is a common theme; close monitoring and assessment characterise settings where children do well in maths. Numbers and developing the concept of 'number' is important in these settings; children know what four *looks* like by the time they move on to school.

There is still a lot more work to be done in early years settings and schools across England. For too many children and young people, the pattern of underachievement in mathematics has not yet been broken. But the latest PISA ranking for 15 year olds in England is promising. Building on this, there needs to be a greater focus on the 'essentials of numeracy' in the early years of education and across all primary schools; the early years framework and primary curriculum need to be relevant and 'fun' for children. For children to enjoy mathematics and develop confidence in their maths competency, they need to experience more positive attitudes amongst teachers and practitioners. This is best developed through focused teacher and practitioner CPD, enhanced through teacher research and encouragement for practitioners and teachers to study further maths qualifications. A lack of good mathematics leadership across all primary schools and early years settings, with good CPD opportunities for staff may be hindering progress. This may be more acute for early years settings, where maths networking opportunities are less common; the more co-ordinated approach provided by the National Numeracy Strategy may provide a good model for early years educators.

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Literacy challenges in the UK

Jonathan Douglas, National Literacy Trust

As a country, we have been achieving high standards in reading for the majority of children. In 2015, 80% of 11-year-olds achieved at least the expected standard in reading, up from fewer than half in 1995, with major increases made under the Primary National Literacy Strategy from 1997 to 2000.

However, the new primary assessment arrangements introduced in 2016 to complement the new National Curriculum show only 66% of 11-year-olds reached the expected level in reading. This is lower than in writing, mathematics and grammar and spelling. The Government has insisted that 2016 SATs data are not comparable with previous years'. While it is possible that previous expectations of children's literacy attainment were too low, the latest assessment data suggest an urgent need to develop consistent year-on-year monitoring of how well children are reading.

Regardless of the assessment method, every year thousands of children leave primary school without the confidence and fluency in reading that they need. The impact on their learning, life chances and engagement with reading is significant. Indeed, pupils' results at Key Stage 4 reflect this: in 2014-2015 75% of all pupils achieved A*-C in GCSE English. This means that 25% of 15-16-year-olds in England may not be able to enter further education and have limited employability and opportunities in life.

Combined with a generally upward trend in reading attainment, we have also seen high levels of reading for enjoyment among children and young people. In 2015, only 10.4% of children and young people aged 8 to 18 did not enjoy reading at all; 54.8% said they enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot; and 34.8% said they only enjoy reading a bit.¹ Research also suggests that children are increasingly likely to be spending their own time reading and levels of daily reading are increasing among children and young people. At the same time, these increases shouldn't be taken for granted: the easy, free and universal access to books and positive reading environments which libraries offer is under threat in some communities. This is happening despite them being recognised as an established, cost-effective and powerful partner in the fight for poverty reduction, economic development and learning for all.²

Specific groups are far more likely to struggle with literacy. For some children this will be related to additional needs, but for many children the reason is less clear. The reading gap between boys and girls in England is one of the widest in the developed world. Children from poorer backgrounds are also more likely to fall behind. A report by *Read On. Get On.*³ concluded that poorer children in rural communities, market towns and coastal communities faced particular challenges. This shows that in addition to gender and the socio-economic gap, children in particular geographical areas are more at risk of falling behind.

The reading gap between boys and girls in England is one of the widest in the developed world. Children from poorer backgrounds are also more likely to fall behind.

Gender

Boys continue to read less well than girls and the gap is particularly large by international standards. In 2016, Save the Children estimated that 80,000 boys had fallen behind by the age of five the previous year; boys in England are nearly twice as likely as girls to fall behind in early language and communication.⁴ There is an identified gap in the evidence exploring the reasons for this, but a review of available evidence found it likely to be due to a combination of factors involving boys participating less in language-related activities, and being less likely to acquire the characteristics associated with literacy.⁵

Socio-economic background

England is one of the most socially unequal countries in the developed world and recent evidence suggests that the situation is getting worse, with alarming indications that social mobility is decreasing. Literacy and reading reflect and reinforce social and economic inequality. The areas in England with the lowest literacy are the most economically disadvantaged.

The relationship between social class and children's reading by age 11 is stronger in the UK than in any other European country apart from Romania. The challenge starts early: in 2015, nearly a quarter of children eligible for free school meals did not meet the expected levels in communication and language development by the age of five. However, it seems that the gap opens even earlier: low income children in England lag behind their high income counterparts in vocabulary by the age of 16 months⁶ and children from the lowest income group were on average 17 months behind children from the highest income group at the age of three.⁷ Data from 2014 showed that only 56.9% of free school meal pupils made the expected level of progress in English between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 compared with 74.1% of all other pupils.⁸

Geography

A recent report by the Education Policy Institute, formerly CentreForum⁹, shows that London has made the biggest progress in both Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 attainment in the past 10 years. Even though attainment in the North East and North West also increased, levels in the two regions are still lagging behind those in London. Similarly, an Ofsted's regional report¹⁰ that focused on the North East and Yorkshire and Humber states that variations in school performance and pupils' achievement disproportionately affect some children in parts of these regions. Our recent analysis of Key Stage 3 pupils' enjoyment of reading, reading behaviour and reading attitudes in Greater London, the North East and the North West supports the previous findings and shows that more pupils in Greater London compared with their peers in the North enjoy reading, more of them read daily and more think positively about reading. For example, while 58% of KS3 pupils enjoying reading either very much or quite a lot in Greater London, only 43.4% of pupils in the North East and 46% in the North West of England say the same. Similarly, while nearly half (47.3%) of pupils in Greater London read daily outside class only a third (35%) of pupils from the North West do the same.

What does this mean for us as a country?

The literacy gap between boys and girls, between children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and their peers, and between children from different parts of the country has several consequences. In addition to reinforcing social and ethnic inequality, poor literacy skills are holding our economy back. The relationship between literacy levels and employment in England is the strongest in the OECD. The implications are stark: children in the UK who fail to learn to read are more economically vulnerable than their counterparts internationally. They have fewer opportunities open to them when they leave school, reinforcing the cycle of disadvantage and preventing social mobility. Moreover, the CBI has found that 37% of businesses are dissatisfied with young people's literacy skills and use of English, with 40% or more providing remedial training in basic skills to school and college leavers.¹¹ If every child left primary school with the reading skills they need, our economy could be more than £30 billion bigger by 2025.¹²

If every child left primary school with the reading skills they need, our economy could be more than £30 billion bigger by 2025.

The inequalities also extend beyond economic impact: 48 % of offenders in custody have reading skills at or below the level expected of an 11-year-old.¹³ Reading engagement and reading for pleasure lead to a range of social, personal, and intellectual outcomes. These include enjoyment, social and cultural capital, social interaction, knowledge, creativity, empathy, self-expression and understanding of self and others. They also lead to health and wellbeing outcomes such as mental health, physical health and relaxation.¹⁴ 37 % of people who rate their health as “very poor” are functionally illiterate, compared with 11 % who have these skills.¹⁵

What needs to be done?

The common factors that will transform children’s outcomes are leadership, focus and partnerships. In order to ensure all children will have a good level of literacy, local challenges need to be identified and local resources harnessed. Public libraries that offer access to free reading materials, professional help and support and reading activities and events are a vital resource for local communities. We also need to ensure continued support for schools. The quality of local schools and services, and the social and community context, are important in determining the impact of poverty on language, communication and reading. Further exploration of how to effectively design provision and services that could support reading to become a social norm in households where it currently isn’t is also needed. This could act as a springboard to encourage harder to reach groups to access libraries and other reading provision. Businesses also have a vital role to play in raising UK literacy levels and 44 businesses (including KPMG, Sainsbury’s, Costa and Boots Opticians) signed up to the Vision for Literacy Business Pledge 2016 reinforcing the sector’s commitment to take action in this area.

It is also important that we maintain a clear, comprehensive and consistent picture of the reading skills, behaviours and attitudes of our children. We need to know how well we are serving them and the challenges they are likely to face in secondary school and in life. Good data and evaluation, produced on a collaborative basis, will be absolutely vital in achieving our aims. It is also important to explore new fields that have potential for improving children’s outcomes. For example, the role of digital technology as a route to engage boys with reading and increase children’s access to books should be further explored.

Next steps

Read On. Get On. was launched in 2014 by a coalition of charities and education organisations¹⁶ committed to getting all children reading well by the age of 11 by 2025, so that they can go on to achieve their potential in secondary school. The campaign emphasises

that getting children reading is a job for us all, the work starts at birth, the importance of enjoyment of reading and having the highest ambitions for all children.

Read On. Get On. has recently published a bold new strategy¹⁷, which sets out how as a country we can ensure our children enjoy reading and leave primary school with the reading skills they need to succeed. The new reading strategy outlines 10 steps to achieving the campaign target for 96% of children to read well by the age of 11 by 2025. We believe that strategic thinking about children's reading needs to undergo a step change if our ambitious goals are to be met and no child is to be left behind. A new type of campaign is needed which builds on the expertise of teachers and the strengths of settings, schools, libraries and the third sector, and which mobilises society. Our work must also build on existing policy and practice to join up, refine and strengthen existing work, and raise its profile. Fundamentally, this step change is about collaboration. Partnerships must include the public, voluntary and business sectors as well as new partners. Children, families and communities must also be treated as core partners, with approaches that mobilise their skills and recognise their needs and expectations.

For more information, visit www.readongeton.org.uk.

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A world-class education system is within reach for the UK

Brett Wigdortz OBE, Teach First

Britain's place in the world has seldom been more debated than it has been in 2016. But in a year when the public has voted for change and has been as unpredictable as any in recent memory, one thing has stayed the same: our education report card would be middling at best.

Because that is in all likelihood what the forthcoming international PISA education rankings will show: our 15-year-olds are educated to a level broadly average amongst developed countries. The media will focus on whether we've gone up or down a handful of places from our current position of 26th. The Government will (fairly correctly) assert that many of their education reforms are working. The Opposition will claim they are not. But there will be no public outcry at the news that our education system is a mid-table average performer, lagging behind high performing countries in East Asia and Scandinavia.

This has to change. I believe that realising the collective and shared ambition of anything less than world-leading education is a disservice to our children. Importantly, it needs to be world-leading for every child, regardless of their background. There is absolutely no reason at all why every child in this country shouldn't be among the best educated in the world, and this ambition is why I first set up education charity Teach First – because regardless of exactly where we've come in the PISA league tables, the overall score will mask huge variations within our country. For too many young people, disadvantage still determines destiny. This is unfair for the young people involved and unfair for our country as a whole.

It should be considered an affront to our brilliant nation and education system that young people from low income backgrounds are half as likely as their wealthier peers to achieve the basic standard we expect of five good GCSEs including English and maths.¹ And despite this, we know many of the answers to the problem.

No matter how "average" the PISA rankings say our education system is, the reality is a world-class education system is within reach for the UK. We know this because some parts of our education system already are. Take London, which 15 years ago was amongst the worst performing regions of the UK, but has been transformed through the work of tens of thousands of dedicated teachers, school professionals, parents, carers, charities, businesses and young people. Much of this encapsulated in the partnerships and high expectations of

the London Challenge launched in 2002.² If every part of England performed as well for children from low income backgrounds as London does today, then two-thirds of the overall national attainment gap would be eliminated. Some schools in London have closed the gap entirely.

And whilst it will be hard, with concerted effort this can be replicated across UK.

Some of the lessons from London are similar to the lessons from abroad. As co-founder of the international education network Teach for All, I have first-hand experience of the leading education systems all over the world. And I've been lucky enough to work in Singapore and Hong Kong, which made up two of the top three education systems in the world in PISA's last ranking.³

From my experience, all the world-class education systems around the globe have one thing in common – they recruit, train and support world-class teachers. And that's why I'm confident the UK can compete with the best in the world; because we already produce incredible teachers and they are already doing amazing things. It's just we need to recruit more of them, get them to the schools facing the greatest challenges, and, vitally, continue to support them throughout their careers to develop their practice and impact.

In particular, the UK needs to increase the number of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) teachers. For the UK, maths is the weakest of the three areas tested by PISA. And while we do better than the OECD average in science, we continue to slip down the rankings as our actual performance stagnates – a decade on from PISA 2006, despite improved exam results and the transformation of London, the chances are this year's figures will show no significant overall improvement.

We can turn this around – but not without teachers and leaders. An outstanding teacher can be the thing that makes the single biggest difference. Yet in the UK STEM teachers have among the highest vacancy rates of any subject⁴, and recruitment is particularly difficult in areas with high levels of deprivation. This really matters as our economic competitiveness becomes ever more reliant on a steady supply of workers competent in STEM subjects, and as our country looks more than ever for home-grown skills post-Brexit.

The official estimate is that we need to train over 2,000 new science teachers, and even more maths teachers, every year.⁵ But there is a universal recognition that these subjects are proving hardest to recruit for and train. The subjects have the highest vacancy rates, coming in at number two and number three (with computer science at number one) and the TES

recruitment survey finds that recruitment of science and maths teachers has deteriorated the most out of any subject.⁶

It is no surprise that these two subjects are officially recognised on the Government's list of shortage occupations.⁷

Like many problems in education, this inevitably hits young people from the poorest backgrounds the hardest. The 2015 National Audit Office report on funding for disadvantaged pupils found that over half of schools with large proportions of young people from low income backgrounds say that attracting and keeping good teachers was a major problem, compared with one third of other schools.⁸

What does this look like in numbers? It looks like over 400 maths teacher vacancies unfilled – and another 400 in science.

Given these challenges, the incredible work of our teachers shines through to get us to the position we are listed in PISA. But if we're average now, just imagine what could be achieved if we solved these problems. A world-class education system is within reach for the UK, if only we had enough world-class teachers in the right places.

To their credit, the Government is taking this issue very seriously. I'm immensely proud of the important part that Teach First has played, in improving education in London and throughout England and Wales. But also, salaried training routes like Schools Direct are helping to bring in new teachers who couldn't afford a year out of the workplace to study for a PGCE; bursaries aim to encourage the best qualified into the classroom; and all in all a billion pounds will be spent by 2020 on attracting the people we need to the classroom.

Most encouragingly has been the Government's launch of Opportunity Areas – targeting resources, support and our best teachers and leaders to areas facing the greatest challenges and those with the biggest barriers to overcome.

Finally, one of the key changes needed in order to attract potential teachers is to raise the status of the teaching profession. Recent research by the Education Policy Institute found teachers in the UK working more hours, particularly on lesson planning, than their colleagues in other countries.⁹ Similarly, they have much less access to Continuing Professional Development. Teaching will never be able to compete with industries like banking or law on starting salaries, but can offer a more rewarding career with equally good progression opportunities, and needs to be marketed as such. This is one of the reasons we've improved

our own Leadership Development Programme, so that from next September, our trainee teachers will work towards a new PGDE qualification, worth twice the academic credits as a traditional PGCE – integrating strong leadership training with classroom readiness.

Ensuring teaching is seen as a high status profession is particularly important for those looking to change careers. An increasing proportion of the trainees that Teach First recruits are career changers, and it is a segment we are increasingly looking to explicitly target. Many graduates in recent years have fallen into jobs that they subsequently have found do not offer them the fulfilment they seek. There is absolutely no reason why teaching cannot benefit from bringing in more new teachers with experience of other careers, but this will not happen if teaching is seen as "beneath" what they're already doing, instead of the incredibly challenging, rewarding and socially vital role that it is. We all have a role to champion that life changing nature of teaching – for children, and for those entering the profession.

The release of the PISA rankings is one of the few opportunities we get to encourage the public at large to look at education in this country in an international context. I hope people see not just that we're not good enough, but that a world-class education system is within reach for the UK – we all just need to prioritise it and focus our energies on those areas falling behind.

Working in education over the past 15 years has made me an optimist – I've met too many young people whose lives have been changed by great schools not to feel encouraged. However, that just further reinforces for me the distance we still have to travel and the awareness that we need to keep on improving just to keep up with global trends, much less to ensure our children get the best opportunities possible.

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What outcomes are important for determining life chances? What PISA scores do not tell us

Jess Tanner and Miranda Dobson from Family Links and The Nurturing Schools Network

International comparison studies such as the 2015 PISA report, published in December 2016 by the OECD, sit uneasily with many, with critics arguing that by ranking countries according to their test scores it perpetuates the view that a successful education system can be determined solely on the basis of its academic outcomes. The data compiled in the PISA report is often viewed as an authority on the success or failure of a country's education system by those with influence over education policy. For example, in July 2016 Nick Gibb MP, Schools Minister, announced a £41m investment into emulating a South Asian style of teaching mathematics, based on top rankings from these countries in the 2012 PISA Report.¹ Although there is clear value in taking note of how different countries achieve high academic attainment, policy makers, governments and education systems still base decisions and attach credence to academic scores in favour of pupil wellbeing, despite a plethora of research evidence, discussed later, implicating the predictive value of character, mental health and wellbeing on a range of positive life outcomes. For many, this raises questions about the criteria we should use when judging education systems: is a successful education system one which produces high test results across the board, regardless of the impact on wellbeing and emotional health? Or is it necessary to also consider whether pupils feel safe, healthy, happy, confident and are equipped with the necessary social, emotional and citizenship skills to navigate the challenges of life? We acknowledge that, around the world, cultural values are inextricably entwined with how young people are raised between parenting and their schooling. For the purposes of this essay, which is written from a UK perspective, we will examine the value of the PISA report rankings with regard to how they are framed and used to evaluate and reform the UK education system.

Where PISA is useful, and how it could be improved:

International comparison studies do have their value: they can be useful learning opportunities, providing valuable insight into effective practices and policies that can be used to inform and improve national systems. They provide international benchmarks, which encourage governments to ensure both their pupils and education systems are achieving their full potential. Findings from PISA² found that the 10% most deprived children in Shanghai achieved similar maths scores to the 10% most privileged pupils in the US, which are particularly inspirational in showing the level of attainment that pupils from educational disadvantaged background can reach, providing the right support and systems are in place.

OECD³ argues that it is not the rankings of countries per se that are useful, it is the deeper analysis of key trends that accompanies them. Triennial assessments through PISA reports enables countries to monitor their own trends across time, and use them to reflect on their own education systems and policies.

However, there are also limitations of PISA, largely linked to difficulties around disentangling education practice from wider cultural values and policies, making it challenging to transfer learning and practice across differing cultural contexts. Different cultures attach varying worth on factors such as creativity, self-esteem and autonomy, and this is reflected in their education systems. For example, Western societies tend to prefer pupil-centred approaches, and learning through active exploration, whereas Asian cultures place a strong focus on repetition and rote learning. Raw quantitative test scores on their own do little to explain or account for the differences in test scores.

Does PISA take wellbeing and resilience into account?

While schools and education systems should uphold their statutory duty to support positive mental health and wellbeing for both pupils and staff, the national and international bodies that set standards and performance criteria also play a key role. By determining the criteria on which schools are assessed, they implicate which outcomes are important, and subsequently what schools should be prioritising. Perhaps the biggest risk associated with international comparison studies lies not in the data that is collected per se, but in the way that the results and rankings are interpreted. Often countries achieving the highest test scores are deemed “high-performing” and viewed as the benchmark that all education systems should all aspire to achieve. In addition to cognitive test scores, the 2015 PISA assessment did include a 35-minute questionnaire on contextual factors, including wellbeing, happiness at school, and perceptions of the school climate, recognising that all these factors impact on academic outcomes, through pupil attendance, motivation and engagement in learning⁴. However, while PISA does take these factors around wellbeing into account, this is only interpreted as being a foundation for academic achievement. Little attention is given to learning from these scores or appreciating that having resilient, happy and socially and emotionally competent pupils can be a mark of success in itself. They argue that limited international comparisons can be made of these “soft constructs”, as both the constructs themselves and individuals responses during assessment are so entrenched within cultural values. Instead, they argue that assessment of contextual factors is useful for individual countries to reflect on trends over time, rather than as a cross-sectional comparison. Similarly, while OECD, who compile the data for the PISA report, also publish an international comparison on wellbeing⁵, this publication is not nearly as positively anticipated or regarded when considering improvements to the UK education system. If we are using countries

achieving high test scores to inform our education system, surely we should also be looking to see what we can be learning from countries, such as the Netherlands, who score highly on measures of children's wellbeing?

If we are using countries achieving high test scores to inform our education system, surely we should also be looking to see what we can learn from countries, such as the Netherlands, who score highly on measures of children's wellbeing?

Are high performing children happy?

Although positive pupil social emotional wellbeing is associated with increased academic outcomes⁶, findings from the Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England⁷ indicate that there is no correlation between the academic achievement of schools and either pupil happiness at school or pupil subjective wellbeing: schools that are achieving the best results academically do not necessarily have the happiest pupils. Indeed, in some cases, the increased pressures and competitiveness in schools with high academic achievement may actually harm pupil wellbeing.

Of particular note is South Korea, a country whose "high-performing" education system is held in international high-regard, scoring in the top five of all OECD countries for maths, reading and science⁸ yet the lowest out of all 38 countries for pupil happiness at school⁹, and the highest for suicide rates¹⁰. These findings are replicated in the Children's Worlds International Survey of Child Wellbeing¹¹, which compared children's subjective wellbeing across representative samples from 16 different countries. Korean children scored the lowest out of all the countries on life satisfaction and personal wellbeing. When life satisfaction was further split into seven key areas relating to wellbeing, findings showed that the dimensions of self-confidence, and autonomy of choice were the key predictors of poor life satisfaction, with the author attributing lower self-confidence to the competitiveness culture in relation to both academic performance and body-image. Similarly, low scores on autonomy of choice can perhaps be linked to the regimented and disciplined education regime, both inside and outside of formal school hours. Figures reported in The New York Times¹² suggest that the average Korean child spends 13 hours every day on educational pursuits, spending as little as 5.5 hours sleeping. Interestingly, despite consistent high performance on test scores in international comparison studies, Korean officials now seem to appreciate that the outcomes of a good education system should extend further than academic test scores. In an interview with the BBC¹³, Professor JuHo Lee, a former education minister, argued:

Test scores may be important in the age of industrialization, but not anymore. So we look into the ways to reform our education system, not based on test scores, but based on creativity and social and emotional capacities.

Does pupil wellbeing matter?

Hopefully, these reforms will see South Korea score more favourably on wellbeing measures in the 2015 PISA report, but it begets the question of whether we can, or indeed should, judge schools or education systems as “high-performing” solely on the basis of academic attainment and test scores, or whether we need to adopt a more comprehensive approach. Is it justifiable to laud schools or education systems purely on the basis of their academic performance, regardless of the expense it may have on pupil mental health and wellbeing?

Research indicates that poor wellbeing in childhood has pervasive effects into adulthood, with Kessler et al.¹⁴ finding that over half of people diagnosed with mental illness during their lifetime experience difficulties before the age of 14. In addition to long-term outcomes, childhood mental and emotional health is also linked with a range of education outcomes, including lower attainment¹⁵, lower attendance¹⁶ higher exclusion rates¹⁷ and reduced academic engagement¹⁸. A high-pressured academic system, linked to a testing and performance culture, not only impacts on the wellbeing of pupils through the direct stress and anxiety this induces: OECD¹⁹ indicated that countries with a high performance culture had a limited curriculum, dedicating minimal teaching and learning time to subjects such as PE, PSHE, and the creative arts, subjects that are all linked to positive wellbeing and character development.²⁰ It also highlights the need for schools and wider educational systems to develop policies and procedures that support and promote positive wellbeing, rather than undermine it. This could include anti-bullying policies, positive discipline strategies, in addition to targeted support for pupils with identified difficulties.

It is not just pupil wellbeing which suffers under systems with increased academic pressures. Teacher wellbeing has also been identified as a concern, both in the UK and internationally, with increased workload and stress contributing to 10.4% of the UK teaching population leaving the profession in 2014.²¹ With teacher wellbeing directly impacting on both pupil wellbeing and attainment²², education systems should support staff wellbeing in and out of the workplace, as well as investing in their continued professional development. Interestingly, one of the reasons attributed to the high test scores found in Finland is due to the level of trust, respect and autonomy given to teachers by both parents and schools.²³

What factors are important in determining positive life outcomes?

Whilst higher academic achievement is linked to better life chances²⁴, a plethora of research indicates that non-cognitive skills are as, if not more, closely associated with positive life outcomes²⁵. Non-cognitive skills, including social and emotional and character skills, are predictive of diverse life outcomes, including academic attainment, employment prospects, relationship satisfaction and good health²⁶. Claims that PISA assesses pupils on the extent to which they “*have acquired key knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in modern societies*”²⁷ are unconvincing when pupils are only assessed through maths, literacy, science and “financial literacy” test scores.

Social and emotional skills are important in their own right, but are also linked to a range of child social and wellbeing outcomes, such as bullying, mental health and life satisfaction. However, they also interact with cognitive skills to enhance academic performance.²⁸ This highlights the need for schools to focus on the development of social and emotional skills, particularly as Cunha and Heckman²⁹ found that they are more malleable in adolescence than cognitive skills. Similarly, while once thought of as stable “traits”, research suggests that key character skills such as resilience and conscientiousness are also developed through learning and experience. Roberts et al.³⁰ found that character had as much predictive value on employment outcomes as socio-economic status and cognitive abilities.

While the PISA report is useful for giving insight into effective practices for high academic attainment around the world, the value of ranking international test scores is limited. As can be seen from the example of South Korea and Korea as a whole, a culture of high pressure on pupils can result in poor life satisfaction, low confidence and even high levels of suicide. As noted above, South Korea’s government has acknowledged that reforms must be made to promote social and emotional skill development. In the UK, as a society that places value on pupil-centred approaches to learning and active exploration, our policy makers, governments and educators should not be solely focusing on emulating education systems that produce high test scores, but also on systems that support and nurture pupils to fulfil their potential, participate meaningfully in society and lead happy fulfilled lives.

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Connecting the Unconnected

Katy Neep, Business in the Community

Educational inequality is the single biggest issue facing the UK today. People who are born into low-income families, regardless of their talent or hard work, do not have access to the same opportunities as those born into more privileged backgrounds. Unless this becomes the main priority of any government seeking to create a fairer society, we will never create the world class education system or workforce that our nation is capable of developing and future PISA results will confirm that.

In its 2016 State of the Nation report, the Social Mobility Commission outlines that despite some success in narrowing the gap in education attainment between poorer children and their better-off classmates, the deep-seated social gradient in how well children do in school has not been flattened. From the early years through to universities, there is an entrenched and unbroken correlation between social class and educational success. The report goes on to highlight that poor careers advice and work experience mean that even with the same GCSE results, one-third more poorer children drop out of post-16 education than their better-off classmates.

Much of the evidence and analysis that has emerged since the Brexit vote in June demonstrates that there is a clear regional divide between those young people who succeed at school and beyond and those who do not.

Young people are becoming increasingly polarised because of their social background and geography. Only 1 in 8 young people from low income homes go on to earn a high income as an adult.¹

Educational inequality impacts not only the health, well-being and career options of our young people; it also leads to a shockingly large amount of wasted potential at a time when businesses are struggling to recruit the skills they need. The UKCES Employer Skills Survey 2015 found that 23 per cent of vacancies were hard to fill because of skills shortages – a proportion that has not changed since 2013.² Unless we tackle this problem, those countries that have done well in the latest PISA survey will accelerate away in terms of job creation, productivity and future growth - that is why we must act now.

Business in the Community (BITC) has been campaigning in this arena for over 30 years and in that guise were asked by the FEA to convene a group of organisations to turn the tide on

this issue. The group, which consists of BITC, Teach First, Future First, Career Ready, Enabling Enterprise, Education & Employers, Ark, Inspiring Futures and Founders4Schools, all work to enable young people at risk of being marginalised, to build successful working lives. We do this through engaging employers and employees and bringing their expertise and experiences together with schools and colleges that serve some of the most challenged communities.

Our mission within the Fair Education Alliance is to see an increase in the number of young people from schools serving low income communities who stay in education or employment-based training once they have completed Key Stage 4 (KS4). Our goal is for 90% of young people from these schools to be in post-16 education or employment-based training by 2022; currently this figure is 84.9%.

Our organisations span provision for young people aged 5-18 and our models engage not only pupils but also teachers, school alumni, governors and school staff – a whole school approach. Collectively, we share the ambition of working to ensure that the 3.7 million young people who live in poverty in the UK make it out of poverty by building successful working lives underpinned by their education. Government, business and charities all have a collective responsibility to move the dial so we are delighted at the Social Mobility focus this Government is taking. Together we need to focus particularly on geographies that have little or no provision of employer engagement, employability and experiences of the world of work for young people.

We know that a young person who has had four or more quality interventions with an employer is five times less likely to be NEET ("Not in Education, Employment, or Training")³. This is why we are working to develop a collaborative model of employer-led careers education, drawing on the core elements of all of our work to provide a nationwide solution.

The report 'Downward mobility, opportunity hoarding and the glass floor,' highlights that less able, richer young people are 35% more likely to become high earners than brighter poorer peers.⁴ Alongside providing access to diverse, quality opportunities for young people, employers need to look at how they support young people whilst they are in education to access opportunities that develop skills beyond qualifications.

Our own research 'Destiny should not be determined by Demography,' highlights the role that employers can play in ensuring that young people understand the behaviours, skills and qualifications required to build successful working lives. The research concludes that pupils

participating in Business Class are 13% more likely to have alignment between their academic activities and their career aspirations.⁵

This is increasingly important at a time when many companies are changing their recruitment practices to focus more on skills and competencies, rather than qualifications. Skills that are regularly and consistently cited by employers are interpersonal, communication, self-management and problem-solving skills. Through Enabling Enterprise's work, it is clear that there is a lot schools can do to build these skills in the classroom. This is doubly effective with the engagement of employers too – for example, through challenges, visits to employers, or mentoring.

Predominantly these activities take place at secondary school level and the President of the CBI, Paul Drechsler has called employer engagement in Primary School a 'business blind spot.' Inspiring primary age children, showing them a wider world of possibilities helps to lay the groundwork for their success and underpins our long-term economic prosperity. There are also meaningful benefits to building critical skills from a young age, as they support learning and engagement, as much as future employability. Alongside ensuring that there is support for young people in the cold spots, we need to be looking at supporting more engagement at a primary level.

Research in the Gatsby report into global best practice in careers education in schools clearly identifies that a key component of the most effective systems is the presence of a trained and valued careers and employability lead.

We believe that having an individual within the school to be more than just a champion is a pivotal part of making employer engagement in schools work and embedding it for the long term. Teach First's Employability Leader Programme aims to enable middle leaders in schools to take on the role of coordinating a whole school strategic approach to careers education. Our FEA group believes that increasing the status of careers education within schools and the creation of a pipeline of senior career leaders committed to championing pupil employability is a key part of creating the necessary change. We would ask employers to support this ambition by working with teachers in the classroom and by providing them with the opportunity to experience the world of work to help build their learning and development in this area.

Alongside this work it is essential to provide access to independent, advice and guidance, particularly for the most disadvantaged young people. Neither employers nor teachers can provide this role in the vacuum created by the disbanding of Connexions.

In other countries the role of the Careers Leader in a school carries qualified status and needs to understand how this could work in the UK and what role it has in supporting young people through key transition moments, such as the transfer from primary, options at year 9, and post Year 11. It is here that we as a group will focus our attention in the coming months.

An education system that works alongside employers to build enterprise and employability skills, character attributes and careers knowledge and experience is one that will ensure that all young people, regardless of postcode or family income, are able to build successful working lives and create the skilled workforce we need. Providing opportunities at all ages and stages, creating a recognised role for teachers and tackling independent, advice and guidance will all be critical to meeting that ambition.

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Securing equity and access to Higher Education - What more needs to be done?

Mary Curnock Cook, UCAS

Perhaps it is controversial to start by saying that the UK's admissions system is almost unique in the world in the extent to which it facilitates student choices in a way which is fair and transparent.

Our central, undergraduate admissions service, UCAS, ensures that all students go through the same application process, are considered on the basis of a common set of information, and pay one application fee. It is an exceptionally transparent process and it generates an extraordinary window and mirror on the system through the data it generates.

Each year, we publish a comprehensive End of Cycle report which contains details of who goes to university and with what qualifications and grades.¹ This examines admissions patterns for different kinds of universities and highlights the trends that emerge for people of different ages, backgrounds, ethnicity, and gender.

Through this analysis we can show that regardless of someone's ethnic heritage or background, their chances of being offered a university place largely depend on their predicted grades and the kind of course they are applying to. But while we have demonstrated² that there does not appear to be systemic bias at work in the admissions system, significant inequalities in access to higher education persist.

If you are from an advantaged background, you are six times more likely to go to a more selective university than someone from a poor background. If you are Black, you are around a third more likely to enter higher education than if you are White (although the Black group is the least likely to enter a higher tariff university). And if you are a girl, you are around a third more likely to go to university than if you are a boy.

We can integrate and analyse the multiple effects of background, gender and ethnicity on entry to higher education and confirm what Theresa May said on the steps of Downing Street, that "if you are a white, working class boy, you are less likely than anyone else to go to university".

In fact, our analysis shows that fewer than 6 per cent of white boys from disadvantaged backgrounds make it to university. This means they are six times less likely to go than the average in England.

So if it's not unfairness in the admissions system, what is it that creates these inequalities in admissions to higher education?

Primarily, it's attainment; how well you do at school. We can track the year-on-year increases in entry rates to higher education and show that these are almost entirely in step with year-on-year changes in the GCSE grades achieved. Stronger achievement at GCSE feeds through to stronger attainment at age 18 which in turn supports access to a university education.

Whilst we should celebrate national improvements in GCSE attainment and the doors this has opened to higher education, we cannot overlook the fact that 43% of young people do not achieve five good GCSEs with English and maths. Nor can we overlook that achievement at GCSE is segmented in a way that feeds straight through to university entry rates. Boys do worse than girls, the white group does worse than all other ethnic groups, kids from poor backgrounds do worse than those from richer backgrounds.

As well as facing this attainment barrier, groups under-represented in higher education also often face challenges in terms of expectations and encouragement.

Earlier this year we conducted a survey which asked the 2015 undergraduate intake what the motivations were for their choices, what barriers they faced and what they thought about their school friends who did not go to university.

The findings from the survey were published recently in a report entitled "Through the Lens of Students".³ Over 16,600 18 and 19 year olds responded providing thousands of free text comments.

The survey told us that more advantaged students are 52% more likely to have known from age ten that they wanted to go to university than their disadvantaged peers. Nearly half of disadvantaged students didn't know they would apply until they were 16 or older. So, too late to make sure they have the right GCSE subjects and grades for some courses, and potentially too late to have picked the right subjects for A levels or vocational qualifications.

Additionally, those who were sure that they would apply to university at age ten or younger were two-and-a-half times more likely to be placed at more selective universities than those who were not sure until they were 16 or older.

In other words, being brought up in a background and going to a school where university is a normal and expected pathway following secondary education makes a difference. People from more disadvantaged backgrounds are much more likely to be the first in their family to go, and may only start to think about university once they have got good enough GCSEs. UCAS' research suggests that interventions need to be made at a younger age, at Key Stage 3, or even earlier.

If we want to stamp out inequality in access to higher education and ultimately the workplace, we need to do more than just incrementally increase the size of the top slice that applies. We have to address the things that stop young people engaging in learning at school *before* they become low achievers. And we need to engage with students at a younger age, and in a more sustained way.

Many initiatives to support progression to university take place when students are in years 12 and 13 at the time when students will be thinking about their course choices and university applications. Unfortunately this means that they are typically targeting young people who have already overcome the key attainment hurdle that could hold them back from higher education.

Also, too many interventions are one-off activities, perhaps partly reflecting that universities' Access Agreements are negotiated and measured on an annual basis.

There is no quick fix. Making significant inroads into widening access has to be more than just talks about university in primary schools and it has to be more than just outreach activities aimed at already qualified students.

Some of the most interesting and successful interventions I have seen are not about extra classes to catch up on reading, writing and maths. They are sustained initiatives that help young people to dare to have ambitions for their own future, develop their confidence, and find a personal rationale and motivation to engage with learning at school.

Many 'failing' children lack stable home lives and boys from the poorest backgrounds can struggle to see their place in the world, with few role models to help them understand that education has a purpose and can change their life chances. Without male role models at

home and few at school given the high proportion of female teachers, they can continue to fall behind in school.

Engaging boys and providing them with role models that will electrify their interest in learning can be done. I've recently seen the work of Football Beyond Borders (FBB) in a south London school, where children take part in extra classroom based learning which uses football as a context.

So Year 7s were improving their literacy by writing stories – about football, of course. Year 8s were learning about communication and marketing – putting together the end to end task of designing, promoting, and running a football tournament amongst local schools. Year 9s were imagining their future selves by writing job descriptions for their dream jobs – mostly in, yes, football.

After these classes, as part of the reward for doing the extra classes, the kids got out on the pitch for high quality football coaching. Those who engaged fully in the programme got to meet and interview famous players, and to go on tour to play matches around the UK and overseas. And the outcome? Significant improvements in attendance, behaviour and self-belief.

Likewise, the award winning charity IntoUniversity offers young people from disadvantaged backgrounds aged from 10 upwards access to a range of support and services which have been demonstrated to improve attitudes to learning, and improve attainment and progression to higher education. Critically this includes early engagement, offering young people in years 5 and 6 a programme spanning two years to familiarise them with the idea of higher education and introduce the idea that university is a realistic goal. In addition, local learning centres offer young people after school help, tutoring and mentoring with basic skills and GCSEs, as well as A levels – often with the support of a local university.

Common factors that unite these, and other, successful programmes are a commitment to investing in young people over an extended period of time, and strong local knowledge and partnerships with schools.

Whilst the effectiveness of university sponsorship of schools, and involvement in curriculum design continues to be debated, there is clear evidence of the potential for greater university partnerships with third sector organisations that support youth action.

If we want to deliver significant shifts in equality of access to higher education then resources and effort need to be rebalanced away from access and outreach work aimed at those who have already achieved sufficiently well to access higher education and towards younger age groups at greater risk of disengagement. This could be revolutionary in breaking down barriers for more disadvantaged students who simply do not know how much they could achieve.

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FEA Recommendations

In April 2016, the Fair Education Alliance published a number of recommendations that we believe will help England build a world leading education system that is fair. These are listed below:

- **Early Years:** Support for the continued development of the childcare and early education workforce should be a top priority. Our long-term ambition is for all group settings to be led by an early years teacher or equivalent, supported by well-qualified staff at all levels. Initially, the government should commit to working with the sector to ensure that every group setting serving the 30% most deprived neighbourhoods in England is led by an early years teacher or equivalent by 2020. The government should also use the forthcoming early years workforce strategy to set out how it plans to reverse the decline in early years teacher recruitment; and how it will ensure professional development and progression opportunities are available for everyone working in childcare and early education in England.
- **Teachers and leaders:** We welcome the pilot of the National Teaching Service and its expansion, should the pilot prove successful. However, the Alliance believes that a strong focus on leadership development will be crucial in making the scheme work. The government should also trial the use of mortgage deposit support as a way of incentivising a long-term commitment to the area. The Alliance also recognises that more work is needed to get more teachers and leaders into the National Teaching Service generally and will collaborate with others to help develop solutions to this capacity problem.
- **Character, wellbeing and mental health:** All staff should receive evidence-led professional development and training to enable them to better support the development of these key strengths. This should focus on supporting young people and staff and should be available to staff at all stages of their career.
- **Careers guidance:** We would support the development of a scheme placing highly trained advisers in the most disadvantaged schools to guarantee that young people in these schools receive individualised and impartial expert advice and guidance. We believe that the provision of web based information on its own is not enough to

ensure fair access to impartial advice and guidance for all.

- University admissions: We will work with UCAS to support universities in improving their use of contextualised data. The Alliance supports the efforts made by universities to use such data and would welcome a renewed effort to see where improvements in use can be made.
- Sharing of best practice: Collaborative models of continuing professional development (CPD) should be implemented across networks of early years settings and primary schools to share best practice in numeracy and literacy, including the sharing of specialist teachers; evidence suggests the network model is most effective, whilst at the same time providing economies of scale.
- Language development: Children's Centres should continue training language development champions to support parents and carers in developing the language of their children, as with the work of I-CAN, the children's communication charity.
- Numeracy development: There should be a stronger focus on training primary teachers and early years practitioners in early maths development.
- School clusters: Every school should be part of a cluster or collaboration of schools; these may include academy chains, federations, cooperatives or any similar structure with strong mutual accountability. There should be a continuing focus on the development and sustainability of collaborative networks of schools to share best practice and resources, as well as staff.
- Birth registration: Children's Centres should offer a service for registering births, so that new parents have a local point of contact with the state and are able to get information about free childcare, as well as other support available before their child is two.
- Whole-school approach to developing character, wellbeing and mental health: Schools should develop a whole-school, integrated approach to the character development of pupils, including a focus on social and emotional skills and good mental health for both children and staff. Schools should also continue to develop and embed whole-school CPD programmes focused on increasing aspirations (pupil, teacher, head teachers, parents and carers and other staff) and improving access and

achievement for all pupils. CPD should be monitored and evaluated in the context of pupil outcomes; this can be effectively supported through charities like the Teacher Development Trust.

- Parental engagement: Schools should develop a whole school approach to engaging parents and carers in their children's learning and development, providing staff with training and support for working with parents and carers. This will increase the impact of their work with charities and other third-sector organisations to develop and embed parent and carer engagement in schools. This approach is reflected in the successful Achievement for All schools programme and government-funded family learning programmes. Parent and carer engagement is a neglected aspect of secondary education.
- Career guidance: Senior school leaders, supported by named middle leaders with front-line visibility, should lead and develop a whole-school approach to student career development, building strong long-term partnerships with one or two key businesses. Evidence suggests that fewer, stronger school-business partnerships work best. This should begin at primary school. Senior leaders (supported by third sector organisations) should also develop good tracking and monitoring systems to evaluate employer engagement activities and student destination data.
- Higher education: Schools should broaden and widen their CPD programme for teachers (at Key Stages 3-5), ensuring all teachers have the knowledge and understanding to play their part in providing opportunities for students to benefit from HE. The CPD programme needs to be focused on aspiration, access and achievement and may be more effective when supported by third-sector organisations.
- Charities and the third sector: Charities should expand character development and support for wellbeing and mental health, as exemplified by the work of Family Links, Place2Be and ReachOut.
- Third-sector organisations providing enrichment opportunities should expand and target schools serving low income communities, as exemplified by the work of Step up to Serve and Debate Mate.

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- Universities: Universities should continue to broaden their more successful outreach programmes, including summer schools, campus visits and mentoring. Universities should consider how to target this work based on need, taking account of regional factors and the characteristics of potential students.
 - Business and careers: The Alliance supports the creation of the Careers and Enterprise Company and welcomes its plans to develop an Enterprise Passport. We believe that its focus should be on measuring progression and distance travelled. Crucially, the Passport should be developed in close conjunction with employers in order to ensure it meets their needs and is recognised in their recruitment practices.
 - Businesses should integrate youth social action into their recruitment processes. This both demonstrates to young people that social action is worthwhile in terms of helping them to develop key skills valued by employers and allows employers to identify those individuals with improved work and life skills.
 - Businesses should not reinvent the wheel but come together with other employers and employees, including third sector organisations, to share their content and platforms widely. We believe that this can help the government achieve its aim of creating a new generation of mentors to help young people fulfil their potential and improve their life chances.



The Fair Education Alliance

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