

PISA, Finland and other international comparisons

Government rhetoric around international competition continues to be powerful, and has been heavily deployed by Gove to support his narrow-minded vision of education.

Firstly, there is a problem in basing curriculum design on scores in international tests. The tests are limited to three subjects: reading, mathematics and science. Education systems vary in the emphasis they place on these. An over-anxiety about these test scores narrows the curriculum by marginalising everything else.

Secondly, it is wrong to assume that the economic development of a country depends on these attainment levels. Many other factors are involved. We cannot allow economics to determine education. We need to emphasise the professional responsibility of teachers to resist the narrowing and debasement of education.

Thirdly, as recent news reports have shown, countries can rise to the top by oppressing children. Children in Korea typically work a 12-hour day, including two or three hours cramming every evening at tuition centres. Tutoring and long hours are also a feature of Shanghai. (NB Incidentally, the main reason why Shanghai has come top in PISA is that half the child population disappear before they reach age 15: the children of the poorer half of the population, doing all the menial work, have to return to rural areas of family origin if they wish to continue school beyond age 14. This is because they do not have citizenship of Shanghai.)

Finally, many hidden factors are at work in international tests. England does well in some tests, but not PISA which demands better problem-solving capacity. This has not been well emphasised in a test- and Ofsted-dominated system for many years, and Gove's curriculum is simply making matters worse by driving teachers to use rote-learning methods. Social inequality is also a major reason for England's poor performance.

One good reason for highlighting Finland in the powerpoint is because children there are not overworked. Its education system operates without tests or inspection, but pupils who begin to fall behind receive a lot of support. Because it listens to teachers, it has a broad and balanced curriculum, not too detailed, and appropriate to the age of the child. Teachers receive a lot of professional support from local authorities and are encouraged to work together to improve teaching – as in England before the 1990s. Finland has consistently scored very high since 2000, and, though a little lower in 2012, was positioned 6th, 3rd and 2nd among countries for maths, reading and science.