

## The Hattie Reports: Is Policy on School Improvement correctly aligned?

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Author Andrew Crompton  
LGiU/CSN Associate

### Summary

[The Politics of Distraction](#) and [The Politics of Collaborative Expertise](#) (both June 2015) by John Hattie, and published free by Pearson plc, the British multinational publishing and education company international, raise questions about the direction of education policies across OECD countries that are particularly pertinent to the direction of policy in the UK over the last 25 years, particularly in relation to how one improves schools.

This briefing explores Hattie's thinking and the background to his two most recent papers which are focused on the current issues faced by policy makers.

This briefing will be of interest to all those elected members and officers with responsibility for school education, and all who work in education policy making or school improvement as well as those involved in school management, curriculum development, or staff training.

### Overview

John Hattie, from New Zealand, but now Professor and Director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia, has written widely for students and teachers and is co-editor (with Eric Anderman) of *The International Guide to Student Achievement*. Prior to publishing the two papers that are the subject of this briefing, John Hattie published *Visible Learning* which collected a large meta-analysis of policy changes and their impact from developed countries around the world, arguing that most interventions 'work', inasmuch as they show a positive impact, and can then be lauded by politicians as 'successful'. The real issue, however, is whether a policy change shows an above average effect or not. He outlined two key concepts:

- a) That one year's input should generate one year's progress,
- b) That you can measure the effect of policies through the concept of 'effect sizes'.

His research included an analysis of large national student achievement databases where the average progress made annually was calculated at 0.4. An 'effect size' above 0.4 provides more than a year's growth for a year's input, anything below generates less than a year's progress from a year's input. Hattie's work has led to the generation of lists of top interventions by 'effect size', but he has also been at pains to show that success is not just about the most effective interventions, but also how you approach them. For example a reduction in class sizes, has not always been accompanied by a change in behaviour by the teacher, and has not therefore had as great an effect as might have been thought possible.

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The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) say in [Let's use the power of collaboration to overcome the politics of distraction](#) (13 June 2015) that the “two recent papers ... from Professor Hattie provide clear and compelling evidence for what really makes a difference in education, and what is, at best, a distraction”.

## Briefing in full

The central argument behind the two papers is that what makes the biggest difference is what happens in the classroom. Within-school variation – the difference between the most and least effective teachers in a school – is much greater than between-school variation. Unfortunately, Hattie feels that policy is often focused on the latter, and often has little effect.

## The Politics of Distraction

Hattie's starts by observing that the fundamental problem is that political leaders in many different education systems “struggle to have the hard, somewhat uncomfortable discussions about the variability in the effectiveness of what happens at the classroom level (where they would need to rely on the knowledge and expertise of others) and instead focus on policies which are politically attractive but which have been shown to have little effect on improving student learning.” He says a range of performance within school is down to variability between teachers which is something everyone (pupils, parents, teachers, etc) knows about, but which is never discussed. He points to the in-school variability shown by the 2009 PISA results for developed economies which in all cases is larger than the across-school variation. The UK figures for example show a 24 per cent difference between schools, but a 76 per cent difference within schools.

Hattie observes that the distribution of achievement always follows a ‘normal distribution’ (a bell shaped curve), and placing a ‘standard’ at any particular point does not change that. Placing a standard where 80% of students will achieve it usually results in claims that the standard is too low, hence in most cases ‘standards’ are set at just above the level of the average. In other words, setting standards, on its own, has little effect. Hattie is similarly dismissive of discussion about ‘tails of achievement’ and ‘gaps’ or ‘flat-lining’, as too often missing the point or focusing on the wrong thing.

What is needed, rather than a focus on these policy ‘distractions’, is a focus on a year's worth of input generating a year's worth of progress – a focus on classroom interaction, and how one can generate (or fail to adequately generate) the other.

## Distraction 1: Appease the parents

Whilst mass education is seen as a key feature of democratic societies, one of the difficulties of democracy is that parents, rather than students or schools are voters. Hattie argues that attempts to provide more choice of schools, information about school ‘standards’, smaller class sizes, or a range of other policies will not necessarily improve education. He considers the example of California, once a state with better than average educational outcomes in the USA which is now worse than average because voters (as parents) have the power to block tax monies going into education. This has led to a “vicious spiral of falling public confidence in teachers, leaders and public schools” which stems not from any fault of the personnel but because of the power given to the people through voting. The vicious aspect of the ‘choice’ debate being that “too many parents

make their decisions based on proxies of school success” (which includes ‘standards’), whilst in reality ‘choice’ is really limited to those who understand the system and/or can afford to by-pass it.

Hattie suggests that by allowing the debate to focus on what schools can do for us and not what we can do for schools, an argument that schools can only lose is created. He predicts more national debates about the quality of schools, focusing the debate more on between-school issues (rather than within-school variability); a distraction from the real issue.

## **Distraction 2: Fix the infrastructure**

Hattie suggests that focusing on the curriculum has also been a distraction. Whilst the curriculum is important in setting out expectations of what should be achieved and milestones for progress, tying that to a year group based school structure creates the wrong focus. We should be expecting a range of outcomes within any year group, and what is needed are levels of expectation tied to a notion of student development, with assessments that help teachers and students progress through, rather than providing performance indicators for schools.

Reflecting on learning facts as opposed to learning analytical skills, Hattie suggests there is an important relationship between the two which needs to be reflected within the learning environment in the classroom. External pressures to teach particular sets of knowledge, or a greater focus on skills learning (both seen in the UK over recent years) may not be helpful, unless they allow the classroom practitioner to relate one form of knowledge to another in a way that meets the needs of students.

Curriculum packages to be delivered in a specific timespan, with an associated test, which are then left behind in order to focus on the next package and test, are criticised as “tests gone mad” and another ‘distraction’ by Hattie as these leave little room to consider, and act upon, the knowledge and understanding the student has failed to pick up. Hattie suggests we need to see tests primarily as aids to enhance teaching and learning and not as thermometers of how much a student knows at that particular point in time.

Hattie’s last infrastructure distraction is new buildings, popular with politicians as they provide visible symbols of largesse, and which are often heralded as creating something different (in terms of space and technology for example). However, without prior investment in working with teachers to understand how they can teach differently, they will not, in themselves, improve learning.

## **Distraction 3: Fix the students**

Hattie considers numerous countries pouring money into early years education, in the hope of ensuring better prepared students for later learning, but says that meta-analyses show that by the age of eight it is hard to detect who did and did not have pre-school education. For Hattie the system change itself will have little impact without the detailed understandings of practitioners of what learning means in the 0–5 age range. Hence in the UK, better outcomes are found in early years settings where practitioners are also teachers.

Hattie also points to evidence that labelling (e.g. autistic spectrum, various syndromes, etc.), which has grown enormously in recent years, tends to reduce not enhance learning, although it satisfies parents who seek an explanation for ‘unusual’ behaviours. Hattie suggests there may be other

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factors involved as the outcome is often greater spending, more medical interventions, with very little evidence of any impact.

## Distraction 4: Fix the schools

Hattie dismisses the plethora of new forms of school found across advanced economies as having little effect in the long term. For Hattie this “is surely not surprising when it is realised that within a year or so the ‘different’ school becomes just another school, with all the usual issues that confront all schools”. Likewise borrowing notions of transformational leadership from the business world is dismissed, as what schools need is ‘high impact instructional leadership’. Hattie feels there is a need for leadership literature that focuses on educational matters and the role of leaders in putting in place high-impact practice as it is in the classroom where difference is made, not in management infrastructures in or for schools.

Local autonomy for schools is also questioned as an answer to education’s problems, particularly when set alongside choice, competition and accountability. Hattie shows that local autonomy can be positive in some circumstances, but dismisses it as a distraction as the real issue is “under what conditions and to what extent should teachers have autonomy?” A question that policy makers and voters find difficult to focus on as it implies giving up power and influence.

## Distraction 5: Fix the teachers

Hattie questions calls to improve teacher education, claiming that the greatest point at which teacher learning takes place is in the ‘aftershock’ of starting to teach. For him collaboration and support are needed here rather than focusing on better pre-teaching programmes.

Likewise the various ways in which additional adults are employed in schools to ‘support’ students is questioned and research evidence quoted that shows there was no effect on students’ confidence, motivation, attention, independence, relationships with peers, work-completion rates or ability to follow instructions. Hattie suggests that teacher aides tend to separate the teacher from the students (particularly those students most in need of teacher expertise); they become an alternative rather than an addition to the teacher; the students they support spend less time covering the mainstream curriculum; and teacher aids tend to focus on task completion rather than learning.

Performance related pay is also dismissed as a distraction, with no evidence that it has any impact on student learning. Indeed Hattie quotes evidence that 90% of teachers think they will get no recognition for improving their teaching or being more innovative, and he suggests we might be better off paying teachers more for increasing their expertise (in the elements of learning).

## The Politics of Collaborative Expertise

Hattie starts this paper, as with the previous one by stating that policy needs to focus on in-school variation rather than between school variation, observing that the most important factor is the variability in the effectiveness of teachers. He predicts that the politics of distraction will lead to the demise of teacher expertise and suggests that demonstrating that there is a ‘practice of teaching’ is the only alternative. He suggests we need to show the difference between experienced teachers and expert teachers; and that some practices have a higher probability of success than others. His aim is to “begin describing what a model of collaborative expertise would look like and what we need to get done to make it a reality”. Collaborative Expertise includes roles for

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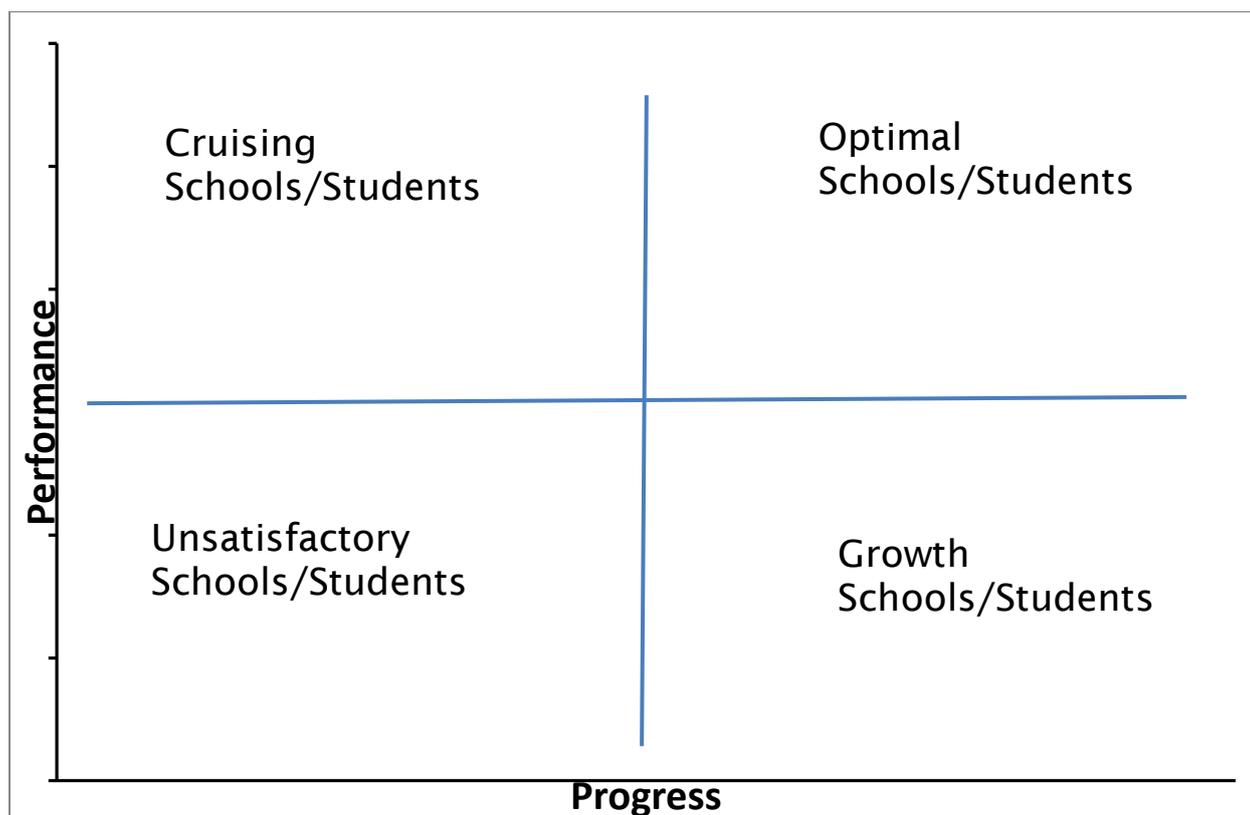
- a) Teachers (maximising the effect of their teaching on all students in their care)
- b) School leaders (harnessing the expertise in their schools and leading successful transformations),
- c) The system (providing support, time and resources for this to happen)

Hattie argues that putting all three of these together gets at the heart of collaborative expertise.

## Building collaborative expertise: a task list

Task one on Hattie's list is changing the narrative: from the teacher to teachers; from standards to progress (and away from an obsession with narrow value added); and from academic measures to critical outcomes of school (which are much wider).

Task two is agreeing what a year's progress looks like. Hattie suggests that the development of a common conception of progress is the key to accelerating progress, and feels that standards setting sessions where teachers share examples of work and agree what it means to have made so much progress, and what it means to be good at something, are very important, although this will be harder in some subjects than others. This will enhance teacher's understanding and confidence in how to evaluate, challenge and progress. Hattie quotes the example of New Zealand which has undertaken a programme of cross moderation across all subjects, with teachers expected to use their own judgements alongside test outcomes. New Zealand is now considering adopting this approach in the primary sector too.



Hattie uses the above diagram to illustrate how a focus on progression can work, where progress is an aid rather than an alternative to performance. Schools will be in different sectors of this diagram and will need different strategies to pursue their different trajectories to the optimal point.

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Because their trajectories need to be different, Hattie points out that a 'one policy fits all' approach will not work.

Task three is expecting a year's worth of progress for each child. It has been common knowledge for some time that teacher and student expectations affect outcomes. Teachers with high expectations get better outcomes from the same students than those with lower expectations. Students settle into accepting their place in the achievement hierarchy, and do not expect more than they achieved last time. Hattie suggests that teachers that have a positive and lasting impact on us, are the ones who transmitted their passion or somehow got us to raise our expectations of ourselves.

Task four is developing new assessment and evaluation tools that provide feedback to teachers about how well their students are doing. For Hattie it is this feedback on how successful teaching has been in a particular area, and for which students it has been particularly successful for, that is the critical element. Teachers can be supported to design their own assessments which will tell them what students have learnt and what they think they should do next.

Hattie describes task 5 as 'know the impact', or alternatively, developing a culture of evaluation in schools. School leaders have a key role here in ensuring their institutions are "incubators of programmes, evaluators of impact and experts at interpreting the effects of teachers and teaching on all students". The student voice has an important role to play, and evaluating impact has to be a process that starts before teaching begins.

Task six, ensuring teachers have expertise in diagnosis, interventions and evaluation, follows from task five. Teachers need to know and understand what students bring into the classroom, what motivates them and link that to a toolbag of strategies designed to maximise learning. The most effective teachers work together as evaluators of their impact on their students and move from what students know to explicit success criteria. They also welcome and receive feedback about their effects on learning, using the goldilocks principle (not too much, not too little, but always positively focused) when challenging students.

Scaling up success by recognising what we already know is task seven. Hattie feels teachers like to think their class and their work is unique. But in reality they have a detailed knowledge of what works well and what does not, and this could be put with the knowledge of other teachers much more effectively. Hattie suggests other professions do this better, perhaps because teachers avoid the harder, collaborative evaluation he feels is required.

Task eight, linking autonomy to progress gained by students, is not an alternative to collaborative expertise for Hattie, but a part of it. High impact teachers have earned the right to do things their way a bit more, whilst those whose impact is not so high will need to learn from others and adjust and adapt their practice. Hattie wants a collaborative expertise that "allows all to join the successful".

## The implications of collaborative expertise

- 1) Teachers have to collaborate more. Hattie suggests that one of the problems is that teachers are still work alone with learning communities dominated by the sharing of resources, anecdotes, 'war stories', and sharing beliefs about why or why not something might work. He says that staffroom discussions are mainly dominated by "curriculum, students and

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assessments – rarely by learning, and even more rarely by the impact of teaching on student learning”. For Hattie acknowledging that “you teach differently from me, and I respect that” is really code for ‘Just leave me alone’. Whilst a strong research and evaluation base is also needed, the focus of collaboration needs to be on the evidence of impact and developing a common understanding of what impact means.

- 2) School leaders need to have the expertise and background to lead the debate about learning and its impact amongst the teachers because it is day by day decisions on the part of teachers which will generate progress for students. They therefore need to build an environment of trust, where interventions across teachers can be discussed, implemented and evaluated. School leaders need to understand impacts, and the reasons for success and the culture they create needs to focus on two questions:
  - a) What is the evidence that each student is gaining at least a year’s progress for a year’s input in every subject?
  - b) What is the school doing in light of this evidence?
- 3) Education systems need to support leaders in schools in diagnosis, intervention and evaluation and ensure that collective wisdom is developed. A collective ethos of trust rather than accountability needs creating, and systems need to esteem success in terms of impact on students. Education systems should not however be closed, and an openness to external influence should also be fostered, as long as it helps to answer the two key questions above.

## Comment

Hattie ends [The Politics of Distraction](#) with his own data on policy ‘fixes’ in education and their relative effect size, commenting that the most popular policies are towards the bottom end of his effectiveness table. He summarises [The Politics of Collaborative Expertise](#) by observing that the best performing countries on international comparisons are those that invest their policy focus on enabling schools and teachers to observe and change what happens in classrooms.

If Hattie’s work strikes a chord, then the debate about identifying coasting schools, or the debate about using baseline assessment as the basis for a value added measure for primary schools can be seen as examples where a policy obsession with accountability is skewing our focus and possibly influencing what teachers do in classrooms in less than helpful ways.

It is possible, but nevertheless at this moment in time, hard to envisage a shift in the way the teaching profession sees itself as that suggested by Hattie. It is much harder still to imagine the change in policy focus he advocates. The ASCL noted in [Let’s use the power of collaboration to overcome the politics of distraction](#) that it’s hard not to notice how many of the ‘distractions’ Hattie lists “mirror current educational policy initiatives in England”. Perhaps, however, ASCL is right that school leaders, teachers and educational professionals can start to have some impact by creating the ‘collaborative expertise’ Hattie describes within their schools, collectives, and academy chains.

## External Links

John Hattie: [The Politics of Distraction](#) (June 2015)

John Hattie: [The Politics of Collaborative Expertise](#) (June 2015)

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TES: [Academies and performance pay are 'distractions' that won't improve learning, John Hattie warns](#) (June 2015)

ASCL: [Let's use the power of collaboration to overcome the politics of distraction](#) (June 2015)

Parliament: [Education and Adoption Bill 2015](#) (June 2015)

## Related Briefings

[Coasting Schools – a literature review](#) (June 2015)

[School performance in academy chains and local authorities](#) (May 2015)

[Academies and free schools – Commons Education Committee](#) (February 2015)

[Academies and maintained schools: oversight and intervention – NAO Report](#) (November 2014)

[The evolving education system: a “temperature check” – DfE Research](#) (October 2014)

[The Effectiveness of the Academy Schools Programme](#) (August 2012)

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