Rachel Macfarlane

Obstetrics for Schools

A guide to eliminating failure and ensuring the safe delivery of all learners

'If ever there were a book for our time, this is it.' Andy Buck

Foreword

'A guide to eliminating failure and ensuring the safe delivery of all learners' runs the beguiling subtitle of this compelling book. Let's set this proper ambition for *all learners*, firstly, in an international context and, secondly, within a UK historical perspective.

International context

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has run its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests since 2000. They measure the ability of 15-year-olds to apply their skills and knowledge to real-life problem solving in reading, maths and science. The rankings are based on samples of pupils in each country, with about 600,000 pupils having taken this most recent round of tests (Schleicher 2019). In the latest league table – based on results for the tests taken in 2018 – China, Singapore, Macau and Hong Kong continue to lead maths and reading rankings. In science the same countries dominate, with Estonia rising to join the top table. Canada and Finland are up there too, as they have been for a number of years.

As to the UK, it has climbed the rankings since the 2015 tests. It has gone from:

- 22nd in reading to 14th.
- 15th in science to 14th.
- 27th in maths to 18th. (Reported in Coughlan 2019)

These UK figures are based on a sample of about 14,000 pupils in 460 schools. If government and opposition politicians were commenting on these results, claims and counterclaims would doubtless be made for the impact of phonics and mastery maths, academies and increased funding in classrooms. A more sober analysis lies with Andreas Schleicher, the OECD's education director, who said there were 'positive signals' from the UK's results which showed 'modest improvements'. He went on to say that at the current rate of progress it would take a 'very long time' for the UK to catch up with the highest achieving countries (quoted in Coughlan 2019).

So what is the UK not doing that the 'top table' are? I recently met a group of undergraduates who are studying education at the University of Reading. Many come from the countries which feature at the top of the PISA league. They argue strongly that culture trumps systems, that the esteem in which teachers are held in their societies is *the* determining factor alongside the value placed on education by parents. Tutoring outside school also plays a part, they suggested. These undergraduates spoke eloquently about the expectations which *all* teachers have that all children will succeed.

Dig a little deeper into how the 'top table' countries organise things, and examinations at age 16 are a feature of the past, considering that the vast majority of young people are in education or training until the age of at least 18. Not to mention trusting teachers to assess their own students, externally verified. Ask folk in Canada or Finland about the balance between school accountability and school support and they find the Ofsted model an alien force.

The UK will not feature in the top PISA ranks in the coming decades unless there is a seismic shift in how our society values education and teachers – and in how the profession works with government to challenge the accepted orthodoxy that failure for a third is baked into our system. The Chinese, Japanese, French, Indian and Libyan undergraduates I spoke to cannot believe we do this. Why would you? Why do we?

UK perspective

In 1963, John Newsom and his colleagues presented to the government of the time a beautifully crafted, 300-page report entitled *Half Our Future* (Central Advisory Council for Education 1963). The landmark report painted a picture of success and positive self-esteem for 50 per cent of the nation's 15-year-olds. It went on to identify that the other 50 per cent languished with an unsuitable curriculum resulting in poor or no qualifications. The report's various recommendations led to the raising of the school leaving age in 1973. Six decades on and that 50 per cent identified by John Newsom has become *the forgotten third*. When we talk about social justice and 'levelling up', it is these young people who most need our attention.

In 2019 I chaired an independent commission set up by the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL).[1] Every August in this country we celebrate as a time-honoured ritual the achievements of our higher attaining students. Local newspapers

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1   For more information, see our report (Association of School and College Leaders 2019).

picture them jumping for joy. But there's another story. Every year there are many, many thousands of 16-year-olds who fall short of a grade 4 pass in English and maths – and this after 12 years of compulsory schooling. Their chances of progression in further study, future careers and, ultimately, in life are diminished.

What is perhaps not widely understood is that this rate of attrition, this forgotten third, happens year in and year out because it is built into our exam system. In the poignant words of one student: 'it seems a third of us have to fail for two-thirds to pass'.

Grimly surreal as it may seem to the uninitiated, this level of collateral damage is an accepted part of the process for determining the distribution of GCSE grades. In other words, we judge the success of our education system by the number of young people who *don't* gain that pass. Few other high-performing jurisdictions would think that sensible or morally acceptable.

The long tail of underachievement casts a shadow over the UK education system today just as it did in 1963. It is not a necessity but a political choice. System change is needed – and quickly. Indeed, examination reform may come – and sooner than we imagine in an era of disruption in which the extraordinary becomes the common-place, at a faster and faster rate.

Obstetrics for Schools is rooted in another historical perspective, namely that the infant mortality accepted in the Victorian era has been almost eliminated today. Why, the author asks, can the same not be true in education? Why can't *all learners* succeed? In the same way that today's physicians have harnessed the best science and their considerable skills to bring forth safely just about every newborn, why can't this generation of skilled teachers – steeped as they are in strong research as never before – deliver comparably good educational achievements for children and young people?

Rachel Macfarlane's radical, evidence-led narrative contests that with the highest of expectations – and different ways of doing – the current school system *can* deliver top outcomes for almost all students. She may be right. History is against her. The future may be with her.

Roy Blatchford, CBE

Contents

Introduction

Imagine if all children were on an equal playing field. Imagine children waking up believing that their dreams could come true. Imagine what that belief could do for the future of this country.

Marcus Rashford, MBE[1]

This book is about righting wrongs. It takes a look at the deficiencies in learners' outcomes in the UK education system and at the inequity of education provision. The former is evidenced by the shocking percentages of learners who fail to leave school with grades commensurate with adequate acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills, and the latter by the significant over-representation of disadvantaged learners in the third of children who 'fail' at school. This book examines a number of factors that contribute to the current state of affairs. Each chapter focuses on a key potential barrier and offers various strategies related to that aspect of provision, aimed at addressing the educational 'fatality rate' and ensuring success for all. The book is aimed at teachers and leaders in all phases, from early years to sixth form, and at those working in both mainstream and special education.

Many of the chapters contain case studies – glimpses into how particular schools are addressing a challenge and eliminating a barrier to success. The case studies are in the words of leaders at the schools featured. In a few places, I include case studies of specific learners. Here I have protected identities by changing names; however, the stories are completely true. The autobiographical stories I tell are as accurate as my memory allows, but in places I have changed the names of those involved for the same reason.

Each chapter contains some questions, and sometimes suggested activities, for the reader. I very much hope that these will be useful for the purpose of general reflection and application to your own setting and will not come across as patronising. If you don't like them, feel free to skip over them!

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1   See https://twitter.com/marcusrashford/status/1328446896176844806?lang=en.

I often refer to practice that my colleagues and I introduced at my previous schools, and particularly at Isaac Newton Academy (INA), the all-through school I set up in 2011 and led until 2018. I also include some examples of INA tools as appendices at the end of the book. These are offered as ideas and illustrations; I am not suggesting that I have all the answers or that the schools that I led had totally cracked the problem of fatalities in the education system. My aim is not to tell you what to do or how to do it. It is important that each school feels accountable for its disadvantaged and vulnerable learners and devises and takes responsibility for its own actions. There are many different roads to success, and it is vital that schools adopt systems and practices that work for them, in their context and with their cohorts.

It might be helpful to clarify at the outset some points related to definitions and terminology. During this book I shall make references to 'low-income families', 'disadvantaged learners', 'children eligible for free school meals (FSM)' and 'those eligible for pupil premium (PP) funding'. At times I will use eligibility for PP funding as a measure of disadvantage, although it is, of course, an imperfect proxy. It is important to guard against an assumption that it is only those eligible for PP funding who experience economic poverty. Hobbs and Vignoles (2010) found that a large proportion of FSM-eligible children (between 50% and 75%) were not in the lowest-income households. This is partly because the very act of receiving means-tested benefits and tax credits, which entitle a child to FSM, raises the household income above that of the 'working poor'. As educators, we recognise that a proportion of families over and above those eligible for PP funding also experience economic hardship. Likewise, we must remember that financial constraints do not constitute the only form of poverty. Thomas Rogers (2016), writing in the *TES*, argued:

The problem is, I think, that the most significant 'poverty' in the UK today is emotional poverty, mind-set poverty, aspiration poverty, in essence; 'values poverty'.

We know that educational disadvantage can result from many more factors than economic hardship: a special educational need or disability (SEND), a first language other than English, a dysfunctional or fractured family life, being a young carer, or exposure to abuse or neglect. When referring to educational disadvantage, I am taking a wide definition of the causes, and the strategies I recommend in this book to overcome disadvantage and ensure high attainment are effective for learners with a wide range of needs and none.

I also write a lot about parents. When I refer to 'parents', it is in the knowledge that many learners live with carers rather than parents – so, in effect, I mean parents, carers and other responsible adults.

At this point, I should also clarify an important point about the purpose of education and the role of examinations. In this book, I shall focus a lot on strategies to assist all learners in achieving examination success. You might assume from this that I see the role of educators as being to equip learners with the knowledge necessary to succeed in public exams, but that is only partially correct. There is far more to a good education.

If asked to define what I see as the purpose of education, I would say that it is about preparing learners in a holistic way to be ready to lead rich, rewarding and fulfilling lives as thoroughly good people: to thrive in modern society, to enjoy loving relationships, to contribute in a positive and tangible way to the local or wider community, to be happy and healthy, and to identify and enjoy pursuits in which they are 'in their element' – to coin the phrase used by the late, great Ken Robinson in *The Element* (2008). So a good education is about developing learners' character and influencing their behaviour every bit as much as it is about teaching knowledge and skills for exam success. As we will explore in Chapter 6, it is about building learning power, so that learners are self-regulating and autonomous and will continue to learn for life. Great educators care about their legacy beyond results day, just as medical professionals judge infant mortality rates not just on survival at the birth itself but on the baby thriving into their early years and beyond.

However, none of this detracts from the fact that, in our current society, examination success and assessment systems are inextricably linked to enjoying the kind of life that I have just described. There are many who feel (and I count myself as one amongst them) that our education system has not got the balance right between methods and types of assessment by which to determine whether learners have received a good education – that we do not measure all the learning that matters and that some of what we assess is of little practical use as preparation for leading a good life. Yet it is the system in which we operate, and it has a profound impact on life chances.

We could debate whether the Year 6 SATs and GCSE English and maths exams test the skills that are really essential to thrive at secondary school and in the wider world. Nonetheless, if we apply the 'what would I want for my own child?' test, I suspect that we would all wish for our daughters and sons to achieve the early years (EY) benchmark standard greater level of development (GLD), the Year 6 age-related expectations (ARE), a standard pass at GCSE, and so on, as a basic indicator of their preparedness

for their next stage in life. Likewise, we would all want our children to have a genuine choice as to whether they progress on to university or higher education.

As Neil Harrison and Richard Waller (2019) point out, 'the unavoidable reality is that by far the strongest predictor for participation in higher education is attainment in school.' They assert that many working-class young people fail to progress to higher education not 'because they lack ambition, but because the accumulation of disadvantage throughout their childhood becomes embodied in their qualifications.' It is imperative that we eliminate our examination fatalities in order that we improve the life choices and chances of those left behind, who are disproportionately from disadvantaged groups even before they are made additionally vulnerable by their school record.

So what has motivated me and, perhaps more importantly, what qualifies me to write on this matter? In my 30 years as a teacher and school leader, I was always motivated by two overriding desires: firstly, to support students to get the best learning outcomes and be equipped with the skills to prepare them for life beyond school, and, secondly, to level the playing field and tackle the disadvantage gap through my role as an educator. Like most practitioners, as a history teacher and then head of department – long before the days of performance league tables and subject/class residuals in schools – I would pore over my classes' exam results, breaking down percentages, looking at value added, striving for my and my team's results to be the best in the school. In the 2000s and 2010s, when I was a head teacher, I always retained a teaching commitment and took the opportunity – when possible – to have at least one exam class each year so that I was held to account for supporting learners to achieve great outcomes, along with everyone else. And, like all head teachers, I would wait impatiently on results days to compare my school's outcomes by each measure against our school's previous best, against the scores of neighbouring competitors and, importantly, against those of top-performing schools nationally.

The scores achieved by the highest attaining students were always crucially important to me, as a class teacher, middle leader and a head. I have long believed that striving for academic excellence in a comprehensive setting is vital. I was proud that, in 2017, 32% of the GCSE grades at INA were 9–7 and that that was surpassed in 2018, when the figure was 35%. But equally important was supporting students who had historically been lower attainers to reach a level whereby they could safely graduate and progress to the next stage of their education, career and life: a C grade or, latterly, a 4/5 at GCSE, for example. At INA, with cohorts which were very much at the national average in terms of attainment on entry, and with a third of learners eligible for PP funding, we always aimed for 100% pass rates at GLD, phonics screenings, SATs and GCSEs, almost always setting targets of over 90% and believing them to be eminently

achievable. Crucially, we strove to ensure that progress made and outcomes achieved by disadvantaged learners were as strong as their more advantaged peers'.

In my time at the school, we never quite hit a 100% pass rate in external assessments, but we got very near on occasions. In 2017, the GCSE results of the first exam cohort placed the school comfortably within the top 1% in the country for progress. We didn't achieve complete parity in the attainment and progress scores of PP and non-PP learners, but the gaps were very small and students eligible for PP funding significantly outperformed their PP peers nationally. In 2018, Ofsted (2018: 3) recognised that disadvantaged learners 'make exceptional progress across the curriculum' at the school. So, in my career as a teacher and leader, I didn't manage to reach the goal of 0% fatalities within the cohorts in my care, but my staff and I got close at times; close enough for me to believe that the dream could be a reality and to think that some of the strategies we adopted are worth sharing.

Many of the ideas offered in the following chapters, however, come from schools that I have not led or worked in. In my 16 years as a head, I was fortunate to collaborate with and learn from leaders of literally hundreds of other mainstream and special, nursery, primary, secondary and all-through schools. From 2009 to 2018 I led a project for the London Leadership Strategy called Going for Great (G4G). This involved working with cohorts of leaders from outstanding schools across the capital (117 schools in total) and supporting them in sharing great practice and writing about initiatives that had led to their high performance. The work culminated in nine volumes of great practice case studies.

In my current role, as a director of education services in Hertfordshire, I am privileged to see outstanding practice in a wide range of schools and settings across the county. In 2018 I set up a programme – called Great Expectations – which facilitates networking between leaders of participating schools to share great practice in terms of closing progress and attainment gaps and raising attainment for all. The aim of the programme is to bring leaders of some of the most successful schools in Hertfordshire – across all phases and sectors – together to:

- Explore the key features and qualities of schools that have a strong ethos and culture of high performance, the highest expectations of – and aspirations for – all and a no-excuses culture.
- Research strategies and review literature focused on schools that have effectively closed attainment and progress gaps between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers.
- Share exceptional practice and ensure that strong schools are contributing to system leadership in Hertfordshire.

Thus I continue to observe a range of strategies that work in reducing fatality rates – strategies that, if adopted consistently across the country, would radically reduce our national fatality rate and level the inequalities between the disadvantaged and their more advantaged peers. Many of these approaches are shared in this book.

Chapter 1
The problem laid bare

The best anti-poverty program is a world-class education.

Barack Obama[1]

We need to remember that societies are strong when they care for the weak. They are rich when they care for the poor. And they are invulnerable when they care for the vulnerable.

Rabbi Sacks[2]

Let's jump straight in and take a look at some sobering facts and statistics which illustrate the problem we face:

- 'By age five, children from low-income backgrounds are, on average, 15 months behind their better-off peers.' (Gadsby 2017: 12)
- 'Children from wealthier backgrounds are approximately 20 percentage points more likely to meet the expected standards at 11 than those from low-income families.' (Gadsby 2017: 14)
- In 2019, only 45% of disadvantaged pupils in England achieved passes at levels 9 to 4 in English and maths, compared with 72% of non-disadvantaged pupils. (Starkey-Midha 2020: 4)
- The disadvantage gap has now begun to widen across all three phases of education – the early years, primary school and secondary school. (Hutchinson et al. 2020: 11)
- 'The gap for the most persistently disadvantaged pupils, already twice the size of the gap for the least persistently poor pupils, has increased in every year but one since 2014.' (Hutchinson et al. 2020: 32)

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1 See https://twitter.com/barackobama/status/8305989038?lang=en.
2 https://rabbisacks.org/the-politics-of-hope/.

- 'Since 2011, the gap between pupils from black and White British backgrounds has increased in the order of 60–70 per cent. Meanwhile, the gap for pupils who arrive late into the English state school system with English as an Additional Language (EAL) has widened by 11 per cent.' (Hutchinson et al. 2020: 32)

- For SEND pupils, progress in closing the gap for both school support and education, health and care plan (EHCP) pupils has slowed since 2015, 'and reversed for pupils with the greatest needs.' (Hutchinson et al. 2020: 32)

- 'By Year 13 (age 17), nearly one in three young people eligible for free school meals are not participating in education, compared to only one in seven not eligible.' (Gadsby 2017: 20)

- '24% of pupils eligible for free school meals attend higher education, compared to 42% of non-free school meal pupils.' (Gadsby 2017: 24)

- Low-income undergraduates are less likely to stay on a university course. 'Each year, one in 12 university freshers from a low-income background drops out, some 2,000 students in total.' (Gadsby 2017: 26)

- 'Students from higher income families earn around 25% more than those from low-income families. […] three and a half years after graduation […] privately educated graduates earn £4,500 more than their state school counterparts. Their salaries also increase more quickly.' (Gadsby 2017: 28)

- 'Without five good GCSEs, a young person loses out on an average of £100,000 in earnings over their lifetime.' (Starkey-Midha 2020: 3)

- 'Every graduate Prime Minister since 1945 has been an Oxford alumnus.' (Gadsby 2017: 34)

- The cost of poor social mobility to the UK economy per year by 2050 is estimated to be 14 billion. (Gadsby 2017: 10)

- 'If you're born poor, you will die on average 9 years earlier than others.' (Prime Minister's Office and May 2016)

These figures speak for themselves. They convey the moral imperative for educators to take action.

In summary, we know that, compared with 'other OECD countries, children in the UK are more likely to achieve along socio-economically predictable lines; well-to-do children tend to achieve higher outcomes than children raised in poverty' (Goodall 2017a: 4). Disadvantaged children are over-represented in the tail of low attainment in our schools. In July 2019, the annual report by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) warned that disadvantaged pupils finish school 18 months behind their more advantaged peers (Hutchinson et al. 2019: 10). A year later, the 2020 report announced the

sobering news that the gap had expanded to 18.1 months, and 22.7 months for the persistently disadvantaged (those eligible for FSM for 80% or more of their school life) (Hutchinson et al. 2020: 35). Top-attainers in England perform at a similar standard to high-achievers in some of the most successful developed nations in the world, but what distinguishes the UK is a long tail of low attainment, highly correlated with family income and background.

So, as we have seen from the statistics quoted, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to progress into higher education. They have lower average earnings, poorer health and a shorter life expectancy than their more affluent peers. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission's State of the Nation report (2014: 64) highlighted that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are twice as likely to not be in education, employment or training (NEET) and at higher risk of ending up in poverty as adults.

Why the reference to obstetrics in this book's title?

You may well have been asking yourself this question. Well, it's because, although I have opened this book with some rather bleak statistics, if we look at the history of obstetrics and changes in infant mortality rates, we find a story of hope and some important lessons from which we, in education, can learn.

In 1800 the global child mortality rate was 43%. With a combination of the discovery of antiseptics, advances in surgery, vaccines against and cures for infectious diseases, improvements to maternity and infant care and better general health and diet, this had reduced to 22% by 1950. It dropped to just 4.5% by 2015 (Roser et al. 2013). In most parts of the world, the death of a baby during childbirth or as an infant is now a rare tragedy, rather than a commonplace feature of society. There are, of course, still significant variations around the world: infant mortality stands at 11% in Afghanistan at the time of writing, whereas it is just 0.4% in the UK.[3] However, the overall advance is both striking and uplifting.

Like infant mortality rates around the globe, educational outcomes vary considerably from region to region and even between schools in the same locality. In some settings in England, including many which are non-selective, almost all students reach

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3   See https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/infant-mortality-rate-by-country.

the standards of literacy and numeracy required to gain a grade 4 or better at GCSE (or the equivalent), whilst in others the majority of students leave school without the level of maths and English qualification required for progression into higher education or gainful employment. This, of course, reduces their earning potential, their chances of enjoying a rich and rewarding career and life, and even their life expectancy.

This variation is unacceptable, as is the overall approximately 30% 'failure' rate. What is more, it is no more an inevitability, I suggest, than the high infant mortality rates witnessed at the start of the 19th century. Barring a few exceptions (for example, students with cognitive impairments and certain learning disabilities), all students educated in UK schools should be capable of attaining the level of skills and competence required to gain a grade 4 in English and maths by the age of 16 in our currently norm-referenced assessment system.

Our job as educators is to strive to create the best conditions for learning – an environment in which all students can, and almost every student does, succeed, safely delivered into the world as a healthy and resilient learner. Like a well-functioning hospital obstetrics ward, our schools should, and can, be environments in which failures are reduced to occasional exceptions. In this book we will explore the conditions required for this to happen.

Why am I writing this book now?

Well, it appears that, far from being on course to incrementally reduce and close the disadvantage gap, we are in danger of leaving it jammed wide open. Whilst there were some encouraging signs of the disadvantage gap closing at the beginning of the 2010s, the EPI's 2019 report found that the reduction of disadvantage gaps in education seemed to have been slowing down markedly in recent years, with progress in gap-narrowing at Key Stage 4 looking to have ground to a complete halt (Hutchinson et al. 2019: 10–11). In its 2020 report, the EPI brought us the news that:

The disadvantage gap has stopped closing over the last five years and there are several indications that it has begun to widen. […] This is a concerning indication that inequalities have stopped reducing and have started to widen. (Hutchinson et al. 2020: 9, 11)

A powerful manifesto for school leaders and teachers on how they can bridge the disadvantage gap and deliver positive outcomes for all pupils.

In most parts of the world, the death of a baby in childbirth is now a rare tragedy rather than a common occurrence – and it would be considered shocking for medical staff to accept a significant infant fatality rate. It's also inconceivable that a hospital would have a successful delivery target much below 100%.

How could anything else be acceptable in this day and age?

Yet there is an expectation, and acceptance, of 'baked in' educational failure for around a third of 16-year-olds in UK schools each year. Such outcomes need addressing, and this book does just that.

In *Obstetrics for Schools*, Rachel Macfarlane draws on her experience as a head teacher and system leader to share a multitude of practical strategies for overcoming potential barriers to success, presenting case studies and examples of effective practice from schools across the country.

For school leaders and teachers in all phases, from early years to sixth form, and in both mainstream and special education.

Accessible, practical and inspiring, *Obstetrics for Schools* is a great read for anyone who cares about education.
Lucy Heller, Chief Executive, ARK

Obstetrics for Schools is a triumph, and so timely too. I love it and will be recommending it everywhere I go.
Steve Munby, Visiting Professor, Centre for Educational Leadership, UCL

A wonderful book.
Dame Alison Peacock, Chief Executive, Chartered College of Teaching

This book is rare in providing both a compelling vision for education and a range of practical ideas to help achieve it.
Peter Hyman, Co-Director, Big Education, and co-founder and first head teacher of School 21

This book will make a real difference in the schools where its lessons are applied.
Sir John Dunford, former National Pupil Premium Champion

Wise, passionate, compassionate and, above all, practical.
Guy Claxton, author of *The Learning Power Approach*

Obstetrics for Schools is a brilliant book for support staff, pastoral teams, teachers, leaders, governors, system leaders and policy makers.
Marc Rowland, Pupil Premium and Vulnerable Learners Adviser, Unity Schools Partnership

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