

Obstetrics for Schools

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'Obstetrics for Schools' by Rachel Macfarlane is published this month. This is an extract from my Foreword to the book.

'A guide to eliminating failure and ensuring the safe delivery of all learners' runs the beguiling sub-title of this compelling book. Let's set this proper ambition for all learners first, in an international context, and second, within a UK perspective.

International

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has run its 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. For 2018:

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

So what is the UK not doing that the 'top table' are? I met recently a group of undergraduates studying education at the University of Reading. Many come from the countries which feature at the top of the PISA league.

They argue strongly that culture trumps systems, that the esteem in which the teacher is held in their societies is *the* determining factor alongside the value placed on education by parents. These undergraduates spoke eloquently about the expectations which *all* teachers have that all children will succeed.

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.

UK

In 2019 I chaired the independent commission titled '*The Forgotten Third*' set up by the Association of School and College Leaders. Every August in this country we celebrate as a time-honoured ritual the achievements of our higher attaining students. Local newspapers picture them jumping for joy.

But there's another story. Every year there are many, many thousands of students who fall short of a grade 4 'pass' in English and maths at age sixteen - and this after 12 years of compulsory schooling. Their chances of progression are diminished in further study, future careers and, ultimately, in life.

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 the way our exam system works. In the poignant words of one student: 'it seems a third of us have to fail for two-thirds to pass'.

The long tail of under-achievement continues to cast a shadow over UK education today. It is not a necessity but a political choice. System change is needed – and quickly. Indeed, examination reform with GCSE may come – and sooner than we imagine in an era of disruption in which the extraordinary becomes the commonplace, at a faster and faster rate.

Obstetrics for Schools is rooted in an 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 cannot *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 new-born, why cannot this generation of skilled teachers, steeped 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.

[Obstetrics for Schools: A guide to eliminating failure and ensuring the safe delivery of all learners](#)

[Listen to Rachael Macfarlane on the Rethinking Education podcast](#)