

A tough love message from John Hattie

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Few have made as great a contribution to our collective knowledge base about what works in education as John Hattie. In his excellent 2007 book, *Visible Learning*, he documented the evidence of what we know using a meta analysis of tens of thousands of academic studies on hundreds of education interventions. In addition, he has shown himself to be deeply invested in the day-to-day task of changing the facts on the ground in real schools and classrooms, through subsequent practical books and professional development activities for teachers and school leaders.

It is in part because of this unique combination of expertise and investment in change that we invited John to be a contributing author to Pearson's Open Ideas series.¹ The series is designed to shine a light on the diverse and independent insights of the world's foremost education experts. Entries are meant to be forward-looking and practical, prompting discussion, debate, and innovation within Pearson and throughout the broader education community. It's worth noting that the pieces can also be quite provocative, and with his two new papers, *What Doesn't Work in Education: the Politics of Distraction*² and *What Works Best in Education: the Politics of Collaborative Expertise*³, John ticks all three boxes.

In *The Politics of Distraction*, John delivers a tough love message directly to policy makers: despite the best of intentions, the evidence tells us that many of our most popular education policy prescriptions just don't work well enough. Moreover, a focus on these interventions, which include longer school days, more money, and smaller class sizes, are expensive distractors that side step the primary challenge that most education systems face: the variability of teacher effectiveness and overall education outcomes that exist within any one school. We can and should expect more from our schools and for our students.

To John, "more" means that every student, irrespective of their level of academic achievement when they start, should make at least one year's progress for one year's effort. And in his second paper, *The Politics of Collaborative Expertise*, he details a model in which all parts of the education system work together toward this goal. It involves a number of strategies for seeking out and scaling up teacher expertise in our schools, as well as for incentivizing and fostering teachers to work together to build a shared understanding of what a year's progress means.



I agree with John wholeheartedly that we should expect more from our investments in education. And as I wrote with my colleague Peter Hill in *Preparing for a Renaissance in Assessment*⁴, another recent entry to the Open Ideas catalogue, I am in complete alignment with John's assertion that we should be leveraging the promise of technology to support teachers' use of better, on-going, formative assessments at the point of learning. But with regard to the question of how practical action across all fields should respond to an existing evidence base, our views are not identical.

Having played a significant role in policy-making in England, and having advised governments on education policy, I have found a purely evidence-based approach problematic. The evidence is not always clear-cut and is often the subject of vigorous, healthy debate – meaning there is no definitive path forward. In addition, in a fast-moving world, policy-makers often have to innovate, meaning there will be no conclusive evidence available upfront. Take the example of school choice. The implementation of a choice system does not lead to a single, known result. Context matters, and the evidence tells us that the details of the specific choice system that is developed and implemented will drive the effect. Further, as policy-makers continue to innovate, our evidence about what works best will continue to change. With this continuing innovation, I am of the opinion that genuine choice will become a powerful lever for getting us closer to John's goal of every student making at least a year's worth of progress for a year's worth of input. (See for example, the recent Open Ideas report by Tooley and Longfield⁵ that makes the case that choice over schools does matter in the developing world.)

For these reasons, and others, I would argue for evidence-informed policy rather than evidence-based policy. As I discussed recently during the inaugural Australian Learning Lecture on the topic of "Joy and Data"⁶, even the best data can't tell you what to do. Regardless of how good your evidence, it can never do more than inform the very human exercise of decision-making.

The question of what works (and doesn't) in education, is perhaps one of the most hotly debated in our field, and with this new Open Ideas entry, John asks us to eschew the distractors and focus on what the evidence tells us will work best. I invite you to read the papers, share and discuss them with colleagues, and join our global education conversation.

This article first appeared on the Pearson blog at blog.pearson.com, and is one of several on the #HattiePapers, research papers from renowned educationalist John Hattie on what makes the biggest impact on student progress, and what gets in the way. Read the papers at www.pearson.com/hattie and join the conversation on the Pearson blog.



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