

The five top-performing systems are Hong Kong, Korea, Shanghai and Singapore, according to OECD's 2009 PISA assessments. In recent years, Australia and many OECD countries have substantially increased education expenditure, often with disappointing results. Grattan Institute's new report, *Catching up: learning from the best school systems in East Asia*, shows how studying the strengths of these systems can improve our children's lives.

Grattan's report shows that while Australia cannot and should not import policymaking systems from East Asian countries, it has much to learn from their unrelenting focus on learning and teaching, and readiness to make tough trade-offs to achieve their goals.

Australian schools and education systems could match the successes of their counterparts in East Asia by focusing on the things that are known to matter in the classroom: a relentless, practical focus on effective learning and the creation of a strong culture of teacher education, collaboration, mentoring, feedback and sustained professional development.

At this event in Melbourne, Maxine McKew, whose career spans both politics and journalism, discussed the conclusions and recommendations of the report with Dr Ben Jensen, Grattan's School Education Program Director.

Speakers: **Ben Jensen, School Education Program Director, Grattan Institute**
 Maxine McKew

AUDIO: This is a podcast from Grattan Institute, www.grattan.edu.au.

BEN: Thank you all very much for coming. It'll be a pretty informal evening. Maxine and I will have a bit of a conversation first and then we'll open it up to questions from the floor. Maxine, thank you very much for joining us.

MAXINE: Good to be here.

BEN: Thank you. This is actually going live on the internet hence we're kicking off right at 6:00pm. So, thank you all for coming.

MAXINE: Good evening everyone. Just to explain my presence tonight, I worked with Ben last year on a particular project and I spent a fair bit of last year working with a not-for-profit group called Social Ventures Australia. And their brief is to make a difference, particularly for disadvantaged students. So I did a research project with SVA looking at how the national partnership investment is making a difference in some of the poorer schools in our suburbs, not in remote Australia but in our big cities. We partnered with the Grattan Institute and I was there at the dialogue that Ben held last year. Ben, why don't we start with that, although I suppose I've got a bigger question first: the report that you've just come out with, on behalf of the Grattan Institute, is looking at high performing systems in Asia. It's interesting that your report came out first, and then of course we've seen the Gonski Report into funding, so two very significant reports out there. Are you hoping that the combination of these two will elevate education so that we've got a very significant and sober national conversation about it this year? I mean not just in Canberra, but among all the important constituent groups.

BEN: That's the objective. But to elevate the conversation in a very different way from which the conversation was dominated in the past. I'd love to say it's all of us but I think Gonski has been incredibly successful and the government has as well. If you look, Gonski was released on Monday last week and, I don't know about you, but I expected a huge brawl to erupt between government and non-government. And we've largely seen the end of that.

MAXINE: Just the brawl erupted elsewhere.

BEN: Yes, exactly.

MAXINE: But we'll try and ignore that tonight.

BEN: Yeah. Hopefully we've moved away from that. There are, I think, only a few voices now still pushing that government vs non-government line that has dominated debate in Australia for the past 20 years. And now we get onto what the focus should really be about: learning and teaching. And that's what we were trying to push. I think there's no doubt the government's been on that line for a while as well.

MAXINE: So what was the genesis of your research? I mean you wanted to look, am I right, at the "how" question, the implementation, particularly what four top performing systems in Asia are doing.

BEN: Yeah, I think it was a mixture of a few things. One was we've been Finlanded to death in education. Finland has been at the top of PISA and I think we can learn a lot from Finland, I think it's an important point. But if you look at the amount of international education research, there's been an awful lot done on Finland and on Canada now as well (Ontario), but relatively less on what's happening in Asia, at least in the English language international research and definitely [unclear – 3:34]. Also that notion of OECD. McKinsey had done a lot of work around which levers to pull. What are the big levers? Get the best people to become teachers, professional development while you're there, etc. But I think there's a growing body of research about the how. And we all know the how is important but I don't think we're very good at it. And the more we analysed it the more we realised we'd gone down the right path. The big difference there between the high performing systems in East Asia and our own and other Western countries, is not that they've chosen perhaps different policy levers, but really that they've got the how right. And it's where we really struggle.

MAXINE: We'll go through some of those systems incrementally, but first of all to the event you had here in Melbourne...I think it was late September last year?

BEN: Yes.

MAXINE: Just give the audience a feel of who was there, not just in terms of the international visitors, but the senior officials you had there from across the states, the key policy makers.

BEN: Yes, we were very fortunate. We got some wonderful internationals from the four systems we've identified and some other international speakers. And then myself along with research partners Social Ventures, Asia Education Foundation, the very important Asia link, DECD here, KPMG, Hay Group and CPE, got together pretty much every senior education bureaucrat in the country (with a couple of exceptions). So we're talking about the Secretaries of Education across the country. Also, from the political level, we had a number of advisors and I think most importantly we had both the Federal Minister for Education, Peter Garrett, and the Prime Minister as well. So, to have those people in a room of about 35 people, it was a wonderful dialogue because we had the right people around, people were very keen to listen. And we had no formal presentations, no one gave a speech, it was just two days of Q&A: How do you do this in your system? How does this work? We have trouble with this; we've tried this; what works there? And we got wonderful feedback from the people involved, saying this is one of the best things we've participated in. The international guests were fantastic, very, very open, and a whole lot of Chatham House stuff.

MAXINE: Tell me, what feedback have you had since from the Australian officials, because you are right. It struck me that whether they were DGs or whatever in the system, they certainly got it. There was no kind of dissent in the room. Everyone said "Yeah we get this" and "there are aspects of this we can do". So where are the blockages? Are they further down in the bureaucracy? What's going on do you think?

BEN: We've emphasised in the report the disconnect... We'll talk about Hong Kong later, but there's a wonderful connection between very high level education strategy in Hong Kong

and what happens in the classroom. If you read the Education Strategy in Hong Kong, it is one of the best policy documents in the world ever, not just in education, because it basically reads as *This is how we change teaching and learning in every classroom*. Very few policy documents get down to that micro level. You compare that to what happens in Australia, and most Western countries, where we've all read many policy documents, fallen asleep, woken up and thought this really isn't what I want to know about or improve. And I think a lot of it is how do we really structure this? So a lot of DGs are saying the blockage is around having to undergo a major overhaul to change these things. Fortunately there was not the notion that *Oh my, they're on a different path to us completely!* We've been talking about improving teaching to improve learning for a while now. It's just that they've made that connection. I think one of the good things to come out of it was people started to get a more tangible idea of what the difference is between, say, a focus on the teaching that we have and their focus on learning and start to really flesh that out of what that means in practice. And of course just some good policy ideas about how to get things done.

MAXINE: Well actually let's go to Hong Kong because that's the interesting turn around. One, that's happened pretty quickly. In fact, you have to say if you look at the timing, they haven't looked back since they kicked the Brits out have they? I mean the minute Chris Patton went off with the Union Jack, they started turning the system around. So what have they done and what do they have?

BEN: Well yeah, kicking the British out could be our starting point. But, they did a wonderful thing in terms of turning it around. In five years they went from a 17th ranking in PIRLS (the international reading literacy, which is fourth grade reading literacy). They said they're not happy with this. We're obviously a city state, we're not going to rely on natural resources. They can't mine WA and get the profits from it. And their starting point is *Okay, what do we need to improve?* And it's incredible that instead of going *Let's go into this intervention here*, they spent 20 months analysing what learning was. They said *Here's what learning is in our system now, and here's what we want it to be*. And then it mapped their whole education strategy and the long term strategy of how to best achieve that, how to best achieve that change. And then they said *Okay, what sort of teaching do we need to make that change and how do we change teaching?* And again it's change teaching, not teachers. Their education strategy at that point read like an implementation plan of step-by-step *How do we do this? How do we change teaching and learning in every classroom?* And it's interesting to note that 12 years later they are still following that same education strategy.

MAXINE: Now a couple of things, Ben. First of all, what did they mean by changing the emphasis on learning? We hear this a lot. What did they mean by that? What does that look like?

BEN: For them it was very much a notion of the emphasis, but also the type of learning. So they wanted to move from a traditional exam driven rote...

MAXINE: And I think they had public exams...?

BEN: Yes, too much emphasis on rote learning. That drove a lot of what they did. And very high stakes along the way. They wanted to move towards a more holistic style, trying to foster creativity, which I think every system around the world is struggling with. And so within that they also wanted to say *Okay, our focus is about learning, so therefore education policy has to be all about student learning*. Now when I first heard that I thought that sounds fluffy, I've heard that before. But, and we saw this in all of these systems, it actually has very tangible impacts. So if you think about the Singapore example of teacher education, their focus on student learning, the constant feedback from teachers and school principles to those teacher education institutions means that the course is continually adapting to how to improve student learning. If you want to focus on learning, a big debate in Australia and I think many other countries has been on what do we do about underperforming teachers. If you focus on teachers as we do, then you focus on *How do we best sack teachers?* Now we've been in that debate for decades and I hope we're not in it in two decades. The focus on learning says *What do we do to improve learning in the classroom where those teachers are? Let's focus on the students*. Therefore how to improve that learning? We improve a lot of lesson observation, we increase capacity building

for diagnosis of student learning and those sorts of things. What that actually means is that those teachers leave the profession anyway, but it also means your focus is entirely on improving learning. On a more tangible viewpoint, a school inspector - we don't have as many school inspectors; they're not as prominent in Australia as they used to be - but when he/she goes into a school in Hong Kong, at least one person in the team will sit next to a student and spend the day with that student, walking around, experiencing the learning that student has. That's how they inspect and evaluate a school.

MAXINE: Nonetheless it must have been a very, very big change for teachers and principals from that quite rigid, traditional public exam focused system to what you've just described. And yet they've had the turnaround in, say, a 10 year period.

BEN: Yes. It wasn't easy. There's a lot of pushback as well.

MAXINE: Where did the pushback come from? From parents?

BEN: No, pushback came from teachers. Pushback came from teachers and to some degree parents. Parents, I think in many countries but particularly in Hong Kong, are still focused very much on exam results. Is my student doing well? That happens here as well. I speak to primary school principals and they say we get parents coming to put their kid into Grade-1 and they want to know what their VCE result is going to be if they go to this school. That happens everywhere. But it's a very challenging thing to say that we know the profession does X, we're going to change it to Y. That's a very challenging thing for any profession to hear. There's a lot of pushback. The media focus on education in Hong Kong, I think, is greater than anywhere else in the world. The Ministry there and the education officials there have not been the most popular people in the world. It's been a very hard effort, but they have focused their energies on speaking to everyone. And that's been I think a key element of their success.

MAXINE: In fact, if I remember from the dialogue, I think they described a situation whereby they went out of their way to have briefings for journalists and many other stakeholders to say this is what we're doing and why.

BEN: Exactly. And that continues now.

MAXINE: So they didn't just put out a press release or anything.

BEN: Exactly. So we spoke to senior officials in Hong Kong last year and at the end of our meeting they were going off to speak to parents. So we're talking senior officials, we're talking Deputy Secretaries, that sort of level. And they're going off to speak to parents and teachers. And they do this every year. This is ongoing. Now that's the sort of change ... that's the sort of difference in engagement we're talking about.

MAXINE: Let's move on to Shanghai, Ben. Now this is fascinating because I think you say in your report the 15 year old maths students there is two to three years ahead of their counterparts in US, UK and Australia. And what's interesting is first of all their numbers, and the diversity of students. They've got students from the countryside pouring into the city. So they have got an equity gap that they are closing themselves, haven't they?

BEN: Yes.

MAXINE: What distinguishes the Shanghai system and why they're up there, having come into PISA just recently?

BEN: For me, Shanghai was the best professional learning I've ever seen, and by a long way! I don't think the initial teacher education in Shanghai is as good as say Singapore. I don't think they have the evaluation, teacher evaluation or career structures say of Singapore or some of the things going on in Korea. But their professional learning within school was just mindboggling! The amount of resources devoted to it, the huge emphasis on it. So that means you get continual improvement of teaching. And the professional learning is always focused on how to improve learning. So classroom observations are constant. I've never seen that many

classroom observations occurring. It's very, very common and it's done in a way where the focus is on learners. So when you observe a classroom, just say three people are observing in a classroom, if they were observing our discussion today, you might have someone at the back who's looking at us, and then the two other people would be sitting here looking at the audience. One would be focusing on this group, one would be focusing on that group. At the end of our presentation, these people would come and speak to us and say look, it was good, it was great, etc, but this person, this person, this person didn't get what you were talking about.

MAXINE: Now tell me that doesn't feel Big Brotherish?

BEN: It can. I mean no-one likes to be evaluated. I undergo a 360 evaluation and I tell my boss it's very informative and helps my work, but generally I hate it. And I think we all feel that, it's a natural response. We'd all love not to have that. But I think because the feedback is totally around *How do we improve students' learning?* And teachers come out of initial teacher education expecting feedback. They expect to be observed. They've had it in their education and they come out with this expectation. So because the nature of the feedback is not *You've got to change because those students get it*, it is *Okay, we've got our weekly meeting, let's discuss how we adapt your teaching so in the next lesson those three students get it*. Now that's incredible professional learning because you're getting often a peer or a senior teacher saying *How do we improve your teaching?* But also that's how you address equity, or that's how they address equity. That means that those three students don't fall behind. It doesn't mean that two years later those three students enter secondary school with a reading level three years below.

MAXINE: So huge attention is paid to making sure students do not fall too far behind, so that you've got that big equity bit.

BEN: Exactly.

MAXINE: Constantly identifying that. Okay.

BEN: Yes.

MAXINE: Tell us about the life of a Shanghai teacher, because it's a bit different isn't it?

BEN: It is. They have long hours, but teachers here work long hours as well. So the main difference is that the actual teaching time is about 10 to 12 hours per week.

MAXINE: That's class contact.

BEN: That's class contact hours. So that's not quite half of what we have here but for some teachers it's half. It varies, of course, between states and between schools. But if you have a new teacher they will have 10 to 12 hours of teaching time. It might be slightly reduced if they're just in their first year, but not much. They will observe at least two classes per week of their mentor. They'll have at least one to two, perhaps three of their lessons observed each week by mentors and other people. So that takes hours as well. They will normally belong to a research group where they are working on a particular research topic in the field. So teachers are working on particular research topics each year in their school, in their particular subject area. They're identifying a particular area of teaching or learning they want to address. They're trialling new things in classrooms and then they're evaluating that performance at the end of the year. And that involves a lot of group work, team teaching and observation as well. And they'll be involved in these lesson groups which have some similarities to what we would just consider year level groups or subject groups. There is some similarity there, but again the focus is on making sure each student is meeting their learning needs.

MAXINE: So there's a strong academic focus isn't there?

BEN: A very strong academic focus. If you want to get promoted to advanced teacher status in Shanghai, one of your papers (and you are expected to have published many) has to have been peer reviewed by an expert committee. That's the first stage in the promotion to advanced teacher status. So it is a huge emphasis on research and I think that was common

amongst all of the systems. And that actually flows from a real emphasis on learning. I think there's a key difference where they're on a different path to us. If you actually emphasise learning, and if you realise how complex learning is, the next step is to realise how complex teaching is. And therefore you say we have to get very, very skilled people in front of classrooms and we have to totally feed those skills and develop those skills. And I think that's where the key difference is. The focus on learning puts a premium on what it really recognises what teaching is. And ironically our focus on learning increases the status of teachers. And I think that's where we have a difference.

MAXINE: I would have thought what you're describing is actually more professionally satisfying and probably less likely to lead to the kind of burnout we see where people feel they've had it after a lifetime of facing 15 year olds.

BEN: Yes, I don't think there's any doubt about that. I mean if you look at the data about new teachers, many are feeling a lot of pressure. They feel they don't get the support they need and they've gone through initial teacher education that didn't give them practical skills in the classroom. Most of them, in Australia, will go into a mentoring program. But a new teacher in Australia and most other OECD countries will not receive feedback based on an observation of their teaching if they are in a school with a mentoring program as opposed to a school without a mentoring program. So the mentoring programs, again, are not connected to the classroom. It's that disconnect. We've said we want to help new teachers so we implement a mentoring program. I mean Australia has more mentoring programs than most other OECD countries, but they don't have that connection to the classroom. That's again where they've nailed it.

MAXINE: Okay, let's go to Singapore now and this is really, from your report, where you see the gold standard in terms of teacher training. Take us through the structures they've put in place.

BEN: Yes. We're not the first people to say that. I think NIE for a long time has been held up as one of the top teacher education institutions in the world. And I think one of the core reasons is that their feedback loops between the Ministry, the Institution and schools. And it's a continual feedback. You have constant sabbaticals and secondments between the three: between schools, the Ministry and NIE. And you have constant evaluation and feedback operating. The OECD report came out several years ago saying NIE is one of the best teacher education institutions in the world. Two years after that they received their yearly feedback from schools and the Ministry and they said *We have some problems. Teachers are saying to us, and school principals who observed these new teachers are saying to us they're lacking some of these practical skills in the classroom. We've spoken to the teachers, they've gone through the different subjects you offer and said "Look, these really helped us, this really helped us, these didn't."* Therefore they dropped two or three main subjects in their undergraduate program, and moved them to a graduate program and said we have to focus on these skills.

MAXINE: So what sort of content areas have they dropped?

BEN: They dropped philosophy of education, history of education and curriculum and assessment design and said these are important but we're going to put them in the post grad level. They replaced that, some serious content, and said we're going to move to the practical skills. And part of that is observation as well.

MAXINE: The emphasis is on mastery of content.

BEN: Yes.

MAXINE: In your area of expertise and practical ways of how you teach, is that right?

BEN: Exactly. The mastery of content is quite extreme. It's a wonderful idea. They lose people because of it. Basically if you undertake a mathematics teacher degree at NIE you have the same mathematics content knowledge as you do in a straight mathematics degree at NUS (the National University of Singapore). Therefore they lose people at the end of their teacher education, they lose mathematics people, they lose science people to post grads in mathematics, post grads in science. I asked them what is the trade-off? And their response is

well, we lose people but the quality of people we get coming in, the demand for places and the quality of teachers who stay in terms of that subject content knowledge far outstrips the loss.

MAXINE: So importantly, what about entry standards then? Who gets to do this kind of training?

BEN: Yes, Singapore is a small system so you obviously have a lot of variation. And we've made some of that contrast in the report by comparing the Singapore and the Korean systems. But in Singapore we're looking at about the 30th percentile (in terms of the ATAR scores) going into teaching. In Korea it's very, very high. In Shanghai, that's where those figures start to get a bit rubbery but it's a bit lower than Singapore. And in Hong Kong it's sort of similar to Shanghai as well. So clearly we're getting a top cohort going in, but the philosophy is all around that trade-off: we've got to invest in the teachers rather than getting more teachers in. So you actually get NIE saying this teacher's not ready to go into a school but the Ministry is saying we need a teacher there. Eventually NIE wins that argument. They actually make the decision quite often to say we'll go without a teacher rather than one we don't think is ready.

MAXINE: So to sum up, Ben, just before we come out to the audience because I know you'll have a lot of questions on this, these systems are winning on performance, on equity... They don't have the significant equity gap that we're battling here.

BEN: Yes.

MAXINE: And what about value for dollars?

BEN: That's the one. It's hard to get all this great data on all the countries, but if you take Korea as an example, Korea spends less than the OECD average. We spend about the OECD average per student. Now we haven't done this to pretend that Australia has a terrible education system. We're still performing relatively highly across the world, but if you look between 2000 and 2009 we are one of four countries to go significantly backwards in absolute terms. During that period we increased education expenditure by about 40%! I think that reflects the disconnect between what we're trying to do and what happens in the classroom, and that we are just not focusing on learning. The great thing is that what they are succeeding in doing is what we have been talking about doing for a long time. That's why we put such an emphasis on how this can be done. There cultural differences, there are institutional differences, but we've been talking about professional collaboration and increasing professional collaboration for God knows how long, and these systems do it in spades!

MAXINE: Can I just mention, Ben, there are two things that roar out at me, when reading your material, that their systems have that we don't have. They're prepared to say we're going to do this, and we have a 20 year vision and plan to do this, not a 20 minute plan... And they are unitary systems. They're not dealing with eight different jurisdictions. So they're big differences I would think.

BEN: Yes, except for Shanghai. Shanghai is part of a federal system, but we're not talking about China. And if we talked about China, and particularly in the west of China, we're talking about very different education. They are unitary systems that create differences and that's why it has an impact. But we looked at things that are school level issues - about the programs designed and implemented that have an impact on the school, and how they should be designed at the government level and how to make the connection into the classroom. It may not be applicable for a federal government but is definitely applicable in independent, Catholic and state sectors or state governments and I think for school principals as well. In terms of the 20 year plan, the political cycle here creates certain pressures that definitely don't apply in these systems. Now that means two things. First of all short term planning versus long term planning. I would argue that if you have a look across Australian states at the moment, there is an incredible opportunity. If you talk about the opportunities that are taking place this year, and you have a look along the eastern seaboard and across most of Australia, I think you might say that there are some governments that could put in place a 10 year plan. I mean, I don't think anyone's tipping a dramatic change in government in New South Wales soon.

MAXINE: I'd agree with that.

BEN: On that, it was interesting when we talked about Hong Kong because we said it's a little bit easier not having to worry about elections isn't it? And they said *Yes, of course it is, but it creates another problem. When we turn up to a school* (and this is the education bureaucrats in Hong Kong saying this), *when we talk to teachers, and talk to parents about needing to change, we're doing this reform, their response is "You have no legitimacy, we didn't vote for you. What are you doing here?!"* They said it creates a whole new pressure. Now I'm not saying that outweighs not having to worry as much about a political cycle, but it was something I hadn't thought about before.

MAXINE: Let me come out to the audience now. I've got a hand up there, up in the back. Yes?

AUDIENCE: I'm just wondering about the broader context in East Asia. If you look at private institutes that a lot of children go to after school, often 'til 10 or 11 o'clock at night, why do you think that is if a lot of these systems like South Korea etc are performing so well?

BEN: I think you've highlighted the country where the cramming, or the cramming institutes or schools, whatever you want to call them, are at their greatest. And there's no doubt that they are having an impact when we start to compare after school practices or to set up an education system that's quite different. It was interesting when we spoke to all of these systems, we asked what is the one thing where you feel you haven't been successful? And they virtually all said we haven't been able to convince parents that test scores aren't the be all and end all. And to me, that's the biggest cultural difference between here and there. If you talk to a lot of schools in lower SES or poorer communities here, they're struggling to engage parents actively in their child's education. Whereas I think there it's a complete opposite. Again, we're not saying that we want to import a culture. We're not trying to say that. What we're trying to say is there are particular aspects of these education systems that are operating very well, they are the areas where we have been trying to improve, therefore let's try and learn from what these high performing systems are doing.

MAXINE: Good. Yes, gentleman down here.

AUDIENCE: Thank you. I very much enjoyed this presentation, like it sounds very exciting what you're doing. Well...what they're doing and what you've witnessed. I'm a teacher in a foundation studies program, and I have been for 15 years, so I've probably taught over a thousand students from Singapore, Malaysia, China, a whole lot. And one of the things that we notice is with some countries there's a shallow knowledge, where if you ask particular types of questions, you'll get an extraordinarily high performance answer. But if you ask a different type of question, you'll get a disintegrating response.

BEN: Yes.

AUDIENCE: Because the knowledge has been sort of pressed very quickly with an outcomes focus, but without a deeper outcomes focus. And I guess I'm just wanting to ask what's the guarantee that there's a depth to the knowledge? Do they have longitudinal studies of student performance?

BEN: That's a really interesting question because in terms of what Hong Kong said 10 years ago, that's one of the issues they were concerned about. And it's what Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore and actually or for Korea as well, are all investing their money in. That's what they're trying to work out and trying to improve. That's their focus. And it's actually interesting to compare our NAPLAN focus here with what they're doing there. I guess we're all trying to stimulate creativity. How do we stimulate collaboration amongst kids, you know, group work? That's where their energies are at the moment. They realise it's an issue for them that they're trying to improve on. If you look at the PISA assessment, the PISA assessments are problem solving, so they don't suit the classic rote learning. But they're only problem solving to a level. We're not talking about the deep analytical thinking, but they are a step along those lines. So we can say, at that level of problem solving and analytical thinking, they're doing very well. But yes, there are concerns that deeper down. I don't profess to be an expert here, so it'd be good if the camera stopped rolling, but if just the notion of how they talk about creativity there, and the

building blocks to creative processes, particularly in China, it's very similar to the way we talk about creativity in education here. They talk about what we would consider quite classical, almost direct transmission approaches as some building blocks towards creative processes or some building blocks towards creative thought. It's quite different to a lot of the conversation here about creative teaching, if not creative learning. So, again I won't profess to be an expert in that but it's one of those things where there could be a lot more conversation if we start to translate the education research that's done over there.

MAXINE: Yes.

AUDIENCE: I think I heard you say that you thought Hong Kong was the best in the world because of its policy and its focus on learning. I wonder if you could talk a bit about how they define learning and what are the criteria for evaluating the how and the what of their learning?

BEN: The definition's in the report. But what they did was say *Here's what learning is at the moment*. And they thought it was very exam driven rote learning, that sort of thing. And where they wanted to be was a much more analytic creative problem solving sort of focus. So if you can imagine, in the very broad terms, and in terms of what that means for teaching, that classic distinction between a direct transmission and a constructivist approach.

AUDIENCE: (unclear: 37:01)... behaviours were they going to evaluate?

BEN: In the learning or the teaching?

AUDIENCE: Well, in the learning because you said the focus was on learning and you also said in Shanghai there was an observer who would sit at the front and then tell us we weren't learning. How would he know we weren't learning?

BEN: If I answer them together, if you look at students in a class you can tell whether or not they're keeping up or whether or not they're doing something. And in the same way, you can follow that if you have that and you mix it with analysing their assessments and their work, and whether or not the student is getting bored or not... It's the same thing with the high performing students, whether or not they're getting bored etc. and is this challenging content... It's a mixture of that and of looking at students. I mean it's the same way we all try and diagnose learning. You just have a group of teachers in front of you who are diagnosing learning rather than the traditional one teacher up the front diagnosing students' learning.

AUDIENCE: I just want to ask one more question. How many schools did you go into in Hong Kong?

BEN: On this trip probably about half a dozen.

MAXINE: Right. I'll take one up there and then I'll come back here. Thank you.

AUDIENCE: What about early childhood stuff? What's the relationship between what you've done and early childhood learning, you know, the zero to fives and so on?

BEN: I honestly don't have a great answer for that, not because I don't think it's important, but it simply wasn't part of our analysis this time. I know there's quite a bit of variation also between the four systems here, between early childhood education. It's one of those areas where I think, like us, they're starting to invest a whole lot more in. So I'm sorry, it's not one of those areas we analysed.

MAXINE: And a question, was somebody back here? Yes.

AUDIENCE: One of the things that is talked about is that when PISA tests are done, it's quite an event in some of these countries and there's a big, you know, a kind of rush of national pride. Students are clapped in as they enter the hall because they're going to show the world how great their country is. There is a much different approach towards learning in the Asian cultures that we were looking at than, say, in Australia.

BEN: Yes.

AUDIENCE: So I wanted you to comment on that and what lessons we might learn coming from the culture of Australia. That was the one thing. But the other thing, more broadly I think, is that you were saying, and I agree with you, that there's too much of a focus on narrow test scores, NAPLAN and so on, and that's something we want to shift away from. But the reason we're looking at these countries is because they've done well in PISA, which is equally narrow. And in fact the reason why we're testing the things that we're testing in PISA is simply because we know how to test those things. We don't know how to test some of the other things which we value very much.

BEN: Yes.

AUDIENCE: So I'm just wondering why are we pinning so much faith on these, as being exemplary countries from which we must learn lessons, based on what is after all a narrow test?

BEN: Well I disagree that the PISA is a narrow test in the same way that NAPLAN's a narrow test. I mean PISA is a three hour assessment with long answer questions. I mean it's real problem solving questions that PISA has.

AUDIENCE: Actually my thesis was on PISA, so I do have some notion of what it does test and does not test. And the fact that [unclear 40:55] will be ...

BEN: Yes. Nine years.

AUDIENCE: Nine years, which is a long time. And that it's a two hour test. And that what you can assess in a minor domain, like a half hour work.

BEN: Yes.

AUDIENCE: I have talked with the people who designed the test who are unhappy with how much we rely on those tests.

BEN: I understand that. But I think that it is still a whole lot more comprehensive than a NAPLAN test. Of course it has limitations, and you know, PISA doesn't test creativity, PISA doesn't test team work. Trust me, the OECD is investing millions (as are these countries) in how to assess these, in how to teach these skills.

AUDIENCE: I mean we only don't know how to assess them in the large scale. We do know how to assess them, as you were saying earlier, through observation, in a small scale. Why aren't we satisfied with that? These countries only became our models because they are doing something on a large scale test, which is a completely different animal to a small scale or a contextualised observation.

BEN: Yes, I think ...

MAXINE: Could I turn the question around actually? I kept asking this question last year and I never got a satisfactory answer. As Ben has said, we have been spending more and more and more on education and yet, at every level, from early learning right through, our performance is dropping. The gap is widening and our best students are not doing as well as they have in the past. Why? Does anyone want to... yes?

AUDIENCE: My answer is that the money has been going to the superficial elements, not down into the classroom.

MAXINE: Right.

AUDIENCE: Things such as flag poles, chaplains in the school, even buildings, they're not going to directly improve what's happening to the education of each individual student. And

that's what I find so inspiring about this report is that single-minded focus on what's happening...

MAXINE: It's where the money is being spent.

AUDIENCE: Yes.

MAXINE: Right, okay. Anyone else on that? As I say, I was very impressed when I heard some of the very senior bureaucrats in Victoria say last year, with NAPLAN, we're not just looking at the poorer performers, we're actually looking at schools where they have students from high SES backgrounds and they're underperforming. And given all the resources they have, all the brain power they bring in, they actually should be up there instead of here. I think it's a very important question to ask. Yes, up the back?

AUDIENCE: The central state bureaucracies seem to spend a lot of time and effort on evidence based policy reforms which they periodically roll out to schools. What do the bureaucracies in these Asian countries do?

BEN: Let me address that question and also address what we've been doing because besides the notion that there is value in learning from other systems, and that we have to have some measure of assessment, one of the reasons we've highlighted in this report is to say let's not copy and paste these systems - take what's good and bad in each system and put them in here. Let's look at the things that they say drive their success and also they match up very well with the things we've been trying to do. All the education research says that giving teachers constructive feedback based on a lesson observation is one of the most powerful ways to improve learning. John Hattie is the trendy guy in Australia. That's one of the top things on his criteria. I can't remember that ever happening in my school education. Over there it happens in spades. Now that's just one little tiny example, but that is the sort of thing that I want to go well. How have they got that working? Because we've been talking about getting it working here, we've been talking about professional collaboration, we've been talking about getting teachers having greater status, great in research orientation. I want to know how they've been doing that and how we can learn from it. They are high performing. There are problems with the PISA test. When Hong Kong was 17th ranked in PIRLS and they were well aware of all the problems with PIRLS but they said *We want to improve reading literacy*, so they went and changed the way reading was taught in schools. They analysed the learning of reading in schools at the time, where they wanted it to be and they changed reading. They did that through a series of steps. They made a very clear vision of what they wanted their students to learn and, more importantly, how they wanted those students to learn and what teaching was required to do that. Now, at this stage I think a lot of our bureaucracies have done similar things, but to nowhere near the complexity that they've done it. Then, (and here's the big step), they used a series of implementation tools to get those policies into classrooms. They call them Curriculum Leaders but they were basically leaders in every school to change or develop teaching to this new way of teaching reading. They changed the way reading was taught in the initial teacher education institutions. They changed student assessments. We talk in the report about the push and pull of learning, the way curriculum reform and professional development for teachers will push teaching and learning in a classroom and that will be pulled by assessment of students, and accountability for teachers. All of those things were reformed in a way that changed the teaching of reading. So, school inspections came in and focused on what reading looks like in the classroom. They had two types of school inspections: the overall school inspection that I think we're familiar with; and then what they call focused inspections, which targeted very much how reading was taught in schools. So they had a whole multitude of implementation tools going into schools, constantly over a sustained period to improve reading. And that's why I think it's really important to learn from these systems because they've changed the way things have happened there as well.

MAXINE: Right. There's a gentleman down here. And I'll come back there.

AUDIENCE: Hi. I was just wondering in the work you've done for this report what sort of things you noticed that Australian schools and Australian education systems do a lot of that these countries don't, either consciously or just that you noticed.

BEN: I think in Australia it's difficult to say in general because there's such diversity. But there's an awful lot spent on school grounds and buildings here that isn't spent there. I won't mention names, but when these people came out, and we got them to meet several education policy makers here, and they heard about all these wonderful programs we were doing, they said *We just couldn't afford to do that*. So I said *Well you know, you actually spent a similar amount to what we spend, so how do you do it?* And he said class size is an obvious one. But the other thing he said was *We don't waste money on technology*. And he actually said *Where's your first mover advantage in being the first to come up with the best technology for education?* He said *Let the rest of the world work it out and then once it's nailed, just take it*. Now, I'm not advocating that but I'm saying that's what he said, in terms of where that money is spent. And I think it's really interesting to see where our focus is. I think an example is we talk a whole lot about teachers, we talk a lot about curriculum. And if you look at the turnaround, you speak to school principals of turnaround schools in Australia, they all say *One of the big things was when I got the conversation in the staff room to change from what to teach to how we teach. When that changed, I was really pleased with where my school was moving along*. And that is part of the process that's happened there as well. And I think therefore you get the resources devoted there.

MAXINE: Yes, a gentleman, and there's a couple over there...

AUDIENCE: I'm interested in your notion of learning from other systems. You've said that copying and pasting is not desirable. I would say even more, copy and pasting is not possible. Okay. Basically it's just silly concept, copying and pasting, nobody has ever done copying and pasting.

BEN: Well people have tried, actually.

AUDIENCE: Well people certainly tried but they waste their money on it as well.

BEN: Completely. Yes.

AUDIENCE: Because the cultural context in which the idea's travelled are very different and it just can't be done. Now so I'm really quite interested in your push for learning from other systems. Now I fear that we might actually be falling into the very crass politics of comparisons, which really doesn't help because we really do know what needs to be done. And some of the things you've said and highlighted, mentoring, professional learning, these are not new concepts. They go back 40 years. We've been talking about this. We didn't need Shanghai, we didn't need Hong Kong, we didn't need Singapore and lessons from them to learn the importance of mentoring, the importance of professional learning, the importance of evaluation, importance of self-evaluation. All of those things are not new. So what is it that we are learning that is new, that you can identify clearly that we should be picking up now as opposed to something that has been there for quite some time?

BEN: As I said it's not as if initial teacher education doesn't exist here. It's not as if student assessments don't exist here. It's not as if curriculum reform doesn't exist here.

AUDIENCE: What's the purpose of your research?

BEN: If you look at the figures, teachers are more likely to enter schools in Australia that have mentoring programs than most other OECD countries. But the feedback they get related to an observation of their teaching is no more if they go to a school with a mentoring system than without. So we have mentoring systems, they just don't function effectively. They have systems which they say are all based on that feedback that we get going - feedback to teachers - and improving it. Now this is not me saying that mentoring systems don't operate well in Australia, these are teachers saying it. As I've said all along, none of this is new, except perhaps the research groups are a bit new in Australia. But again, it's that connection between education policy in the classroom that we struggle with continuously. And if you have a look at how much we have spent: the first decade of this century we increased education expenditure by 40% and we're one of four countries to go backwards in PISA. Now to me, that says that there's a

disconnect between the objectives of our policy and what happens in the classroom now. Therefore I think we can learn from other systems which have been more successful in making that connection.

MAXINE: There's just one other point I would make - and again this was off the back of my research last year - we're very, very good at seeing individual success stories, we're not good at seeing success across the system. Whether you go out to Hume Central here and see what Glen Proctor's doing, or to low SES schools in Western Sydney or I'm thinking of a school I looked at a lot last year in Woodridge on the south side of Brisbane, very low SES communities, you've got outstanding principals who are turning around performance and are trying to, in a collegial way, let everyone share the learning in their communities. But in fact it's a very patchy network in their state bureaucracies that's really not facilitating that. I think what Ben is describing is a far better system which allows and indeed promotes and requires success across the system. That seems to me what we're struggling with. We had a question... Lady there...?

AUDIENCE: I guess I'd like to make the comment that I was a principal in the state system in Victoria and now I work across schools consulting with them about school improvement. There is a lot of the practice that you've been discussing tonight happening at the grass roots level in schools. There are instructional rounds, there are networks of schools working together, there's a huge focus on the improvement of literacy, there are teaching and learning coaches, there are literacy coaches, there are numeracy coaches working in sustained ongoing work with school communities, with teachers improving that learning. Unfortunately there was a large scale system of coaches trained and put across schools, through networks and through regions in order to support that learning collaboratively across. Now that funding's gone. Now those teachers are hopefully being snapped up by individual schools. But the program - and this is about the political cycle, because it was just getting grounds - those coaches had been trained, and were now skilled operators making a difference in schools in the outcome and the results. I'd say the focus has come back to instructional leadership than had been the case, and I'm only talking Victoria because we were a devolved system. And when we became a devolved system, the principal was expected to be the master of everything in terms of everything to do with running a business, if you like. Now the emphasis is coming back to educational leadership and at the grass roots level in the classrooms the teachers are looking at a large number of instances that improve practice. And hopefully we'll see the outcomes of that in terms of value adding for those kids across the system in the next little while.

MAXINE: I agree, what you've just highlighted there is the chopping and changing approach of, you know, we'll have a dollop of money here for this for a couple of years and then it's changed and it's something else. So it's the short term. There was a gentleman here...

AUDIENCE: Well Ben, I applaud you for helping us learn from the outside. I think it's something our system doesn't do very well. Any of the countries that you've seen, are they very good at learning from the outside, and how do they do it? And who's their Ben Jensen?

BEN: He's much better than me. Singapore and Shanghai are probably two of the world leaders in having an outward approach. They've made it a huge focus to go and learn from other countries, look at what they have done in other systems and bring them back to their systems. They haven't tried to copy and paste but they've said let's pick the best of what we can. And I think that's an important thing. They've had the approach that we can learn from all systems but we've just got to be wary of what's good and what's bad in each system and what we can apply and what we can't apply and then bring it back here. They can take what's best from Western systems and Eastern systems, (probably less so African systems to be honest, because there are other factors there) and bring them back to their systems. And yet I think there's an enormous push back here that we can't learn from there because the cultural differences are too great.

MAXINE: Yes. And then I'll come to that lady just ... I'll come to you next, sorry.

AUDIENCE: Just a very quick question. If you look at the states of Australia and their performance in PISA, they're not all the same. And we talk about Australia's performance and Australia slipping, but actually there are some states in Australia which do better than Finland.

BEN: Not in PISA.

AUDIENCE: In PISA.

BEN: No, not in PISA.

AUDIENCE: Some of the states in Australia do better because we don't actually see state by state results, we only see Australian results. And I'm just wondering about the value of learning from that as well. I'm not at all opposed to looking at other systems and even out of just curiosity if not to draw lessons from that, keeping in mind cultural differences and any of that. But you know, it just troubles me that we don't actually... we say we believe in this data but we actually don't elaborate it, we don't look at it in terms of, you know, there are actually excellent models here as well. I'm not saying in lieu of, I'm just saying that there are actually states in Australia which do better than Finland and PISA, and we should be looking at those.

MAXINE: Which ones?

AUDIENCE: As I remember, I think it was Canberra and surprisingly Western Australia...

MAXINE: Sorry, ACT and ...?

AUDIENCE: ACT and I think Western Australia, but I'm not 100% ...

MAXINE: It wouldn't be the Western Australians, I can assure you. They're down the bottom...

AUDIENCE: I know it's a surprising result, but it's an annoying and surprising result and I cannot remember what it is.

BEN: ACT performs very well in TIMS. I think that might be what you're thinking of.

AUDIENCE: I don't think ...

BEN: Anyway, whatever.

MAXINE: Yes.

BEN: There's an enormous amount of pushback from this report. And we are not advocating that the Australian system is terrible. We are not advocating that learning should not take place between school systems and sectors in Australia. Nor am I saying that we don't learn from Finland. I just think that there has been a dearth of research on what actually happens in these systems in East Asia, the high performing systems, and there hasn't been as much focus on what actually happens, in terms of the policy process, and then how it translates into schools. So that's what we do in the report. And also, in response to what you're saying, I find it very interesting that people have been walking around Australia for the past four or five years saying we need to learn from Finland. Finland has a very different culture from us. Finland is less than a 20th the size of us. Finland has sub-arctic temperatures and I believe we can learn from Finland. But when I say we should learn from systems in East Asia, you should see my inbox. Again, I wasn't saying that *you* were saying that at all.

MAXINE: Okay.

AUDIENCE: Okay. Two systems that we haven't mentioned are the United States and the UK. And culturally we might not be close to Finland but we are close to the US and the UK. And I think we made a big error in adopting mass standardised testing which both of those countries have now shown us leads to narrowing of the curriculum and possibly, and this is only intuitively, maybe a reduction in the achievement level, particular of high performing students if

they're being fed a monotonous curriculum. I think we can learn and I just hope that we will turn away from mass standardised testing and actually move and look at some of these countries in Asia and in Finland. I know we're Finlanded out, but if we look at them, there are some things that go right across all of them and that's teacher training, high standard teaching training. I've not been to Finland but I understand that you're required to have a masters degree to be a teacher there and that they are involved in research. They are involved in collaborative teaching and in doing research together and these are things that are starting to happen here in Australia. They're happening in the school IT chat. And I think that if we can just keep to that program and convince the governments of the day that this is the way to go, that we can learn from these other people, that we might not be culturally the same, there are things that will benefit all students whatever their culture. And move away from thinking that accountability through mass standardised testing is the way to go.

BEN: I'm a little bit concerned here because I have to declare something: Vivian was actually my teacher in high school.

MAXINE: Well, well done.

AUDIENCE: I have to acknowledge Ben as my most successful student.

MAXINE: I must say I've been sitting here thinking there is one thing, whether it's our good friend, the Finns, or whether it's our Asian neighbours, the one thing they all have in common is that all of their students are multi-lingual and multi-lingual from a very early age. And this came up time and time again at the dialogue and you all know the pathetic statistics on the drop in study of foreign languages. And there has got to be a link between being literate in one language and being literate in another. Yes, a quick one and then I've got to go over to this gentleman.

AUDIENCE: I'm just interested about the selection of people for teacher traineeship because I've heard recently about very careful selection and interviewing in Finland... I'm just interested whether that's a feature in these systems that you're talking about, the actual choosing of teachers before they go into training and very careful selection of the appropriateness for what they're going to be doing?

BEN: Yes, it's a feature of them all. McKinseys get the 30% into teaching and get the high performing in. And that is a feature of the systems particularly in Korea which I think gets the top of the top. They take the top one or two per cent. So it's the marks and then you go through. In Korea you go through a three stage interview. Sorry, this is post teacher education when you go through a three stage interview process, the final one of which is a classroom demonstration. In Singapore it's pre-initial teacher education. But again, Singapore is a different system because people are paid civil servants during their time of teacher education. So it's a different process, but yes, again it's that notion that obviously you need good content knowledge, but also it's the suitability. And interestingly a lot of their teacher education changes been pushing towards those sorts of intangible skills. So a lot of community work is also involved say in the Singapore course, those sorts of things, leadership abilities and communication abilities as well. To get to Vivian's point about the impact on testing and whatever, I think we emphasise in the report the need for policy makers to identify the push and pull on teaching and learning in the classroom. And I think that really gets at your comment around the notion of, well if you're assessing this, how does that pull teaching and learning? If your curriculum is doing this, how does that full teaching and learning and what's the emphasis on all of those? If you look at the reforms in Hong Kong around curriculum reform, it was called curriculum reform but it was all about changing teaching. We've had an awful lot of discussion in this country about what to teach.

MAXINE: And we'll make this the last one.

AUDIENCE: Thank you. Now I can understand the need to move away from the notion of inequality and class conflict because it can be a deadening debate. But I actually do think that you can't leave the notion of equity altogether on this topic because what you're talking about with these unitary systems, is a high degree of equity. And I wonder if the level of equity is in and of itself part of the cultural reason why some of this stuff starts to work? And like it's

probably appropriate that it's a Confucian saying that we don't fear scarcity, we fear inequality. And that comes up over and over in history. Because obviously rich schools tend to, well in my experience, focus on status, being good at school for a status rather than good at school for learning. And if you come from a poor area you probably want to get better at, you know, better prospects rather than learning. So I wonder if we actually really do need to talk about equity for the sake of the focus on learning?

BEN: You look at the stats we have very high within-school variation, bigger than most OECD countries, and between school variation is about the same. And I think it's interesting when a lot of people asked what are your big equity programs? And it's the same response in Finland and the same response in a number of the Scandinavian countries, we don't have equity programs per se. They're built into everything we do. And I think that gets around, that gets to the core of what we would talk about with classroom observations around teacher accountability. And for them it's a big equity component. A lot of people in Shanghai would say that's how we get equity, we have multiple teachers in there identifying if a student starts to fall behind. You know, it's that sort of thing. So it's built into the system. Interesting thing: Shanghai has (we didn't talk about it in the report but) Shanghai has a system similar to systems in the UK and here about how to help underperforming schools whereby a school principal at a high performing school goes and helps out, they send teachers over in what's called a help out. And it was really encouraging. I was speaking to one of these high performers and she said *I'm basically involved in six schools at the moment* (as well as her own). And I said, *What are the issues there?* And what she said back to me, I admit through an interpreter, was exactly the same sort of things that we would hear about in an underperforming school here, you know, the teachers' doors are closed, there's no collaboration between teachers, there's no good lesson observation going on or that sort of thing. So the things we are struggling with in our underperforming schools here are exactly the same things that they're struggling with there, but as you say, the disparities overall are not as great. And so, I think it's sort of what you're saying.

MAXINE: I think on that note... there's just one other thing I'd add, and Ben will know this. It is very easy to go to the state education departments and say the success stories from the low SES investment that's gone in from the Commonwealth over the last couple of years. What you can [unclear 69:56] states and couldn't get out of them, and they should be providing this back through the COAG process to Canberra, is the full spectrum. I mean, given the buckets of money, quite frankly, that have gone to addressing low SES and literacy and numeracy, the information should be absolutely transparent now on who are the top performers, who are the ones in the middle and who are the ones that are still struggling. And if you want the policy tool that is going to lift the bottom up, it's got to be along the lines of what Ben has just described - the partnering of the champions with the underperformers. And that's the way it seems to me you can work on getting systemic change. I mean if you all want to do something as activists, get on to the departments and say release that information. They're sitting on all that data.

On that note, on her high horse, thank you for coming and thank you for such interest and for such discerning questions. Ben, thank you. You always knew this was going to be controversial, but I think it provides huge food for thought and I must say I look forward to a much more textured debate about all these issues this year. So, thank you.

BEN: And thank you very much as well. And thank you all very much for coming.

AUDIO: This has been a podcast from Grattan Institute. Want to hear more? Check out our website, www.grattan.edu.au.

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