

Book Review: Education Under Siege: Why There is a Better Alternative by Peter Mortimore

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How do we improve England's school system? Every Education Secretary has their own ideas and subsequent U-turns, but in this book **Peter Mortimore** aims to identify the current system's strengths and weaknesses, and asks readers who share his concerns to demand that politicians alter course. **Cole Armstrong** talks readers through the highs and lows that Mortimore identifies, and finds that some aspects of the author's vision for a new education system are questionable in terms of practicality.



Education Under Siege: Why There is a Better Alternative. Peter Mortimore. Policy Press. September 2013.

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In *Education Under Siege: Why there is a Better Alternative*, [Peter Mortimore](#) describes his vision for a better functioning education system in England, calling particularly upon the Nordic model of education for inspiration. Based upon the author's experience as a researcher and educator in both the English and Danish systems, Mortimore sets out in 14 chapters how he would like to see a better education system operating for primary and secondary students in England. This vision may not be agreed with by all readers, and to my mind a number of aspects are impractical, but it does require the reader to question whether there isn't a better education model for England, and if not, what it might look like.

While the Nordic countries' lustre as a model of education to be followed has taken an unfortunate knock with the recent release of the [OECD's PISA rankings](#), for a number of years education commentators have cast envious looks at these systems. In particular, the author contrasts the English system's focus on the instrumental importance of education, for purposes such as career development, against more personal and intrinsic benefits of education emphasised by our Nordic cousins (the concept of *bildung*). In the author's view "a good education must encompass the development of society and of every aspect of an individual's life" – a holistic education that he believes is neglected by the current system.

Some particularly interesting features in the book are the chapters on the strengths (Chapter 8) and weaknesses (Chapter 10) of the English model, and the ambiguities of the system (Chapter 9) i.e. those aspects that can be both a strength and a weakness. These chapters are particularly appealing as they highlight for the reader and invite them to question those assumptions upon which the remainder of the book will be based.

In describing the strengths of the English system (Chapter 8), the author draws up a lengthy list, including the lack of retentive students meeting minimum standards, school sports, and a visually stimulating school environment. Refreshingly, given the regular media attacks on teachers in mainstream education, Mortimore also dedicates considerable time to describing the high quality of teachers in England – teachers whom he describes as promoting positive relationships with their students, demonstrating remarkable ingenuity and a desire for improvement, and often injecting a sense of enjoyment in class. This is supported by other factors such as the quality of teacher education, and high quality school leadership.

Mortimore contrasts these strengths with some widely reported weaknesses (Chapter 10) within the education system. For



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example, there has been much [debate](#) within the education community over the impact of England's renowned public school sector – epitomised by infamous establishments such as Eton and Harrow – on perpetuating social inequality. Similarly, the market model of schooling, argued for as part of the [New Public Management](#) belief, is reported to have similar effects, with schools with a greater proportion of students from affluent backgrounds hugely advantaged compared to those schools educating less affluent sections of the community. And jumping into an interesting debate, the author argues against the increasing powers given to education ministers, disparaging along the way policies such as Kenneth Clarke's establishment of Ofsted and Micheal Gove's "expenditure on free schools in a time of austerity".

Demonstrating the complexity of public policy, the author describes what he refers to as "ambiguous" features (Chapter 9) – those features of the present system that can be either strengths or weaknesses dependent upon the way they are enacted. For example, out of school activities are of a demonstrable benefit to education in England; however, the way in which they are enacted has helped exacerbate inequality, as less affluent families are often priced out of these activities. And, while stating that "assessment can be motivating" and agreeing with the rationale for assessment to help identify where students need help with their learning, Mortimore comments on recent debates about grade inflation, and the increasing elitism of English school assessment.

In Chapter 13, the author brings us to the main aim of the book: his vision for an improved education system in England. Commendably, the author raises some politically contentious issues in schooling, such as the role of homework, the necessity for school inspections and high stakes assessment, as well as the role of a private education sector. Some of his suggestions resonate well with prior research, such as expanding pre-school provision to all children, or with current concerns such as the role of a for-profit sector.

However, there are some equally problematic suggestions. For example, in an attempt to reduce inequality and segregation along wealth lines, the author suggests the random allocation of students, and even teachers, to schools. Similarly, the author suggests that faith schools, due to their often superior perception in the eyes of parents, should be open to all students regardless of faith. While such issues are of concern, it seems politically infeasible – not to mention problematic in a culture that emphasises the values of individual choice – for such policies to be enacted.

While there are aspects of the author's vision for a new education system in England that are questionable in terms of practicality or impact, the book does make a credible attempt at explaining "why there is a better alternative". In a system that has been delivered in a piecemeal fashion, this is a commendable contribution that will hopefully inspire policy makers and politicians to think more holistically about whether today's schooling system really does deliver the best outcomes for students in England.

Cole Armstrong recently completed an MSc in Social Research Methods at the [Department of Methodology](#) at LSE, with a dissertation that looked at ethnic segregation in New Zealand schools. Cole is currently a Research Manager at an international NGO that utilises the mass media for development purposes. His research interests focus around evaluation methodologies and the use of communication techniques for development aims. [Read more reviews by Cole](#) .