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RADIO CURRENT AFFAIRS

**ANALYSIS
DO SCHOOLS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

TRANSCRIPT OF A RECORDED DOCUMENTARY

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Researcher on the "15,000 hours" study - later became director of London's Institute of Education

Stephen Gorard

Professor of education research at Birmingham University

Estelle Morris

Education secretary under Labour in the late 1990s

Sir Michael Wilshaw

Chief inspector of schools

Nick Gibb

Schools Minister

FX: School bell

ABRAMS: Settle down, now. This week, we've been studying school league tables – haven't we? And I need to know if you've been paying attention. So – hands up everyone – Who came top? And who was it that just plunged through the government's new floor target?

... Anyone? Sigh.... OK. Another question. What if the league tables were so fundamentally flawed that they weren't any use to parents, at all? What if we really weren't sure which schools were good schools, and which schools were coasting? What if, schools didn't really make that much difference to children's lives - at all? No – no – settle down! Nobody's saying school doesn't make any difference. Nobody's saying most children, don't learn things at school. The question was this – can school really iron out social inequality? Isn't it a fact, that some schools have an easier task than others?

FREDERICK: In some areas the children could be left out on the lawn and they would do equally as well.

ABRAMS: That was a head teacher, who thinks quite frankly some schools hardly have to do any work. Because their pupils come from middle class homes with lots of books.

And here's a very eminent professor, who says once you add up all the social factors that affect a child's performance, there's a pretty limited amount teachers can do, to make a difference to their life chances.

GOLDSTEIN: The school effect tends to be rather small. Once you've taken account of all those, maybe it accounts for 10% of what's left, which is not enormous.

ABRAMS: You see, the problem with our education system isn't that the teachers aren't good enough, or that we haven't got the right curriculum, or that we haven't given schools enough freedom from local authority control. It's much more fundamental than that. The problem is we've been expecting schools to rid us of social inequality. We've been expecting – ever since we've had a state education system, actually - that sooner or later a government was going to hit on a magic formula. And then suddenly all schools would be good schools, and all pupils would have an equal chance of being A-starred pupils. Well I've got bad news for you. All the best evidence we've got, pretty much says it's not, going, to happen.

FX: Bell

ABRAMS: OK. That's enough doom and gloom, for now. Gather round! Story time!

A long time ago, back in the middle of the 19th Century, lots of children didn't go to school at all. And some enlightened campaigners thought that if poor

children had a chance to learn to read and write, they'd be better citizens. So the government made it compulsory for all children to go to school till they were 11.

SAMMONS: People in the past thought you start having free education for all - we did that back in the 1870s, it's not that long ago in many ways, and then people became very disillusioned because it didn't seem to make a difference.

ABRAMS: Pam Sammons is a professor at Oxford University. And she says it soon dawned on the politicians that creating a more equal society through education wasn't going to be as simple as they'd thought. The next really big push was in 1945, when we got free education up to the age of 15, and grammar schools were introduced. The idea was that if everyone sat the same exam – the eleven plus – and no-one had to pay for state education, the system would be based on merit, and society would become more equal.

SAMMONS: You opened up education opportunities, but you still had huge social gaps in achievement. And that's why people wanted to know well how can education help to support better outcomes for particularly disadvantaged groups of students.

ABRAMS: You see, the big myth about grammar schools is that they gave children from poor families a leg up out of poverty. They did, for some. But the truth is, mostly they catered for the middle classes. One study by Liverpool University found only a quarter of children in the poorest areas were even entered for the exam – and only one in 10 passed it.

So, in came the comprehensives. Surely now, the politicians thought, everyone'd start with an equal chance in life? But it didn't happen – most teachers were working on the assumption that if you came from a poor background, you probably weren't going to succeed. But then, along came a group of researchers and they started asking questions. They thought that maybe, while most schools were just bobbing along, without ruffling the social waves, some schools might be making a real difference. One of those researchers was Peter Mortimore.

MORTIMORE: There was a strong view, yes, that schooling simply packaged children along. They came in like that and they came out at the end of so many years like that as well. Yes. And so we were asking the question: but hang on, does the intervening period, the actual experience of school make a difference? Now for me, I taught in a couple of London schools that were radically different, so for me there was the likelihood that, yes, it would. I couldn't believe that the one school which actually worked much harder, was much more concerned, much more caring about kids than the other, that it wouldn't have made a difference.

ABRAMS: These researchers spent more than two years sitting in the backs of secondary school classrooms in London, recording what children did all day. The result was a groundbreaking piece of research - called 15,000 hours.

MORTIMORE: The overall conclusion was that, yes, schools did make a difference. It did matter, thank goodness. (Laughs) It did matter what teachers did, how much they were committed, how hard they worked. They didn't make all the difference in the world but I'm satisfied and I think most people were satisfied that it made a significant difference. And we came out at the end with the idea that there were all sorts of things that the more effective schools did that the others didn't and that overall there was a positive ethos in some schools that enabled them to do those things.

ABRAMS: **Looking back now, this was actually quite a modest conclusion. The researchers weren't saying schools were the most important factor in determining children's life chances. Not at all. But back then, they were quite surprised to find it was possible for schools to make that difference, at all.**

Yet it's quite hard to overstate the influence of the 15,000 hours study, since it was published in 1979. A huge field of academic work – known as 'school effectiveness' research - grew up on its foundations. It was all about identifying those positive factors, looking at how they could be nurtured in every school. Professor Pam Sammons was a leading light.

SAMMONS: Those early studies led into quite a lot of sophisticated development in research to try to tease out the difference that a student's background makes. We all know that factors like whether you're a boy or a girl, your socioeconomic status, your family's income, the qualifications of your parents make a difference, but can the school make a contribution and particularly can schools make a difference for disadvantaged students, improve the chances that they will have good education outcomes in the longer term?

ABRAMS: **So what did the researchers say, about the key elements of a good school?**

SAMMONS: The factors that come up as important are the amount of teacher support in the school, the school environment, whether the school's kept clean and well cared for. The behavioural climate of the school, very important. The learning resources in the school, the extent to which pupils feel valued in the schools - these are the kinds of things to do with school and classroom experiences that help to predict differences in student outcomes. So those are the areas we want schools and teachers to focus on when they're thinking about school improvement.

ABRAMS: **Hang on. The researchers identified a number of factors which are normally found in a good school. But that's not quite the same thing – is it – as saying, if all schools had those factors, they'd all be good schools? As any statistician will tell you, just because you've got a correlation, that doesn't imply cause and effect. Stephen Gorard's professor of education research at Birmingham University. And he thinks this is a potentially fatal flaw – and it's one the academics have always known about. He says one of the authors of that 15,000 hours study, used to tell a story to illustrate the point:**

GORARD: You know, she was saying imagine that all the schools that were more effective were more likely to have a healthy potted plant in the foyer,

and the schools that were less effective didn't or the plant had died. Is it the plant that is causing the difference, or is the plant a symptom of the fact that things are going quite well in the school and they have a nice well tended foyer and enough you know resource to have a reception area at all? Now obviously that's a laughable idea, but the reason she said it is to make the point that if you substitute anything else a potted plant, then you've got exactly the same problem. The logic still doesn't work. This dredging through data is not going to cut it for us. I saw a study recently where six schools were deemed to be improving and then the study looked at the characteristics of those six schools. Well there was no attempt to have a group of six schools that weren't improving and compare them, so the design of the research is at fault.

ABRAMS: **If he's right, all the efforts made over several decades to identify the features of a good school – and, disseminate them – could have been based on a false premise. Pam Sammons doesn't accept that. In fact, there's been a furious academic row going on about it.**

SAMMONS: No, I wouldn't agree with Stephen Gorard. We're actually quite lucky in this country. We've got very good data about our schools and about student performance. And I think you know Stephen Gorard is in a very small minority in thinking that it isn't important to look at the contribution schools make while recognising the importance of background.

ABRAMS: **To be fair to the researchers, most of them never said, the difference school could make, was more important than social background. And yet, their work focused on what schools could do - and it often ignored what they couldn't. And, successive governments, both Tory and Labour, took on the notion with great gusto, that schools made a huge difference to children's chances in life. Ofsted inspections, central control over things like the curriculum and behaviour policies, sanctions against underperforming teachers, even league tables - were built on these intellectual foundations. Estelle Morris was education secretary under Labour in the late 1990s. Yet she wonders now if her government didn't just look for findings that supported its own view – which was, that putting pressure on schools to improve, was the way to get results.**

MORRIS: Being human beings you do tend to take notice of the research that supports your prejudices. I think, looking back, that research is still the great, unreformed area of education. What actually happened was that we had some researchers who did work with us and we relied on them, and we had some researchers who tended to produce research that you know didn't necessarily back what we were doing and I suppose we didn't have a good relationship with them.

ABRAMS: **But despite these rather rocky foundations, Labour went all out for the idea that all schools could be good schools - if only they could be made to fit an approved model on standards. And as a result a huge industry began to grow around the research community. A veritable army of consultants, inspection contractors, trainers, educational resource manufacturers, began to get in on the act. Their livelihoods were based on teaching schools how to 'add value' to children's lives. Stephen Gorard says it's time for someone to stand up and say the emperor has no clothes.**

GORARD: It's an industry, there are people making huge amounts of money through selling software and books to do this work acting as consultants, there are companies springing up to offer value added advice to schools and colleges and to individuals and so on.

ABRAMS: **But to be fair, a lot of the people who are doing the research are academics - like yourself - paid for by their universities. Surely they get their salary whatever their findings are, however they do their research?**

GORARD: If your entire career was predicated on the idea of value added analysis in the school effectiveness tradition and someone like me comes along and says well actually it just doesn't work, then you've got a hit to your prestige, to your reputation. The fact that 20 years later we say well actually this isn't working is not an insult to the innovators, the people who had those fantastic ideas or let's try this, you know. But on the other hand they have to have the maturity to say this isn't working.

ABRAMS: **Actually, some of the academics who've been in this from the start accept, that this 'school effectiveness' movement can only do so much. Among them is Peter Mortimore, the researcher on the 15,000 hours study, who later became director of London's Institute of Education. He lays the blame at the door of politicians, who took up his - quite reasonable - conclusions with such enthusiasm.**

MORTIMORE: Governments discovered it, and sadly, in a way, they then I think went right over the top and assumed that because one school could be particularly effective, all schools could be. And that's when New Labour I think got into its stride, demanding that schools change, that all schools become highly effective. I...

ABRAMS: **(over) But is that not ... If there are characteristics you can identify in a good, effective school, can you not translate that to all schools?**

MORTIMORE: (sighs) You can of course address those issues, but what you have to recognise, I think, is back to the original point about the study. You have to take account of different kinds of students. It's a difficult area to talk about, disadvantage, and it can... you can easily sound patronising, but the amazing thing - and I always stress this - is that some of the most disadvantaged kids will do well, that's terrific. But let's not forget they are the exceptions. On the whole, it doesn't work like that.

ABRAMS: **Under Labour, there was some recognition that actually the amount a school could do was limited by its intake. It introduced a 'value added' league table for schools, taking into account things like how many children in a school were entitled to free school meals, how many didn't speak English at home. But there were well-founded doubts about their reliability, and this government has dropped them. So - has common sense prevailed? Well...probably. Nobody in academia really believes those 'value added league**

tables' were any use to parents. But then nobody we spoke to in academia believed any league tables were any use to parents.

GOLDSTEIN: The predictions were just so amorphous, so subject to random variation, that from the purpose of choice you could almost stick a pin in a map of Bristol.

ABRAMS: Harvey Goldstein's professor of social statistics at Bristol University. And he's one of our most eminent educational researchers. He's spent decades, working on ways of presenting schools' results so they tell us something. And he's been digging into the statistics – using Bristol's schools as a case study. Yet his message to parents is: Be, very cautious, if you're trying to use school league tables.

GOLDSTEIN: If you're going to choose a school and you're a parent in 2011, basically you're going to use the latest results which go back to probably 2009. What you're interested in is the performance of those schools not in 2009 but when your child reaches the age when they're taking the exams - 2016. So you're interested in predicting ahead six, maybe seven years. So that adds extra uncertainty because schools change over time. So applying this to our 19 Bristol schools, what we were able to show was that you couldn't really distinguish statistically between any of them. They all overlap.

ABRAMS: So actually, league tables are of pretty limited use if you're choosing a school. You'd be much better off, talking to the neighbours, or - looking at how the children behave at the bus stop. Things that really, most parents do anyway. Of course, there are schools that come top of the league tables year after year, but for the most part – and with some honourable exceptions – they tend to have the best intakes. And they aren't the ones we should be worrying about. The ones we need to worry about are the ones that fall down the table because of some random statistical variation, or because of a gap in their data – and which then face being put into, special measures - or being closed down and reopened as academies. And there's a bigger, even more central question – what is a good school anyway? Do we know? Can we just take that – possibly shaky - research and say: 'Here are the six key features of a good school. Let's all do this?' The new chief inspector of schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, seems very confident we can.

WILSHAW: Well there are essential truths about school improvement whether it's research or government policy. The essential truths are that a poor leader runs a poor school; a good leader runs a good school. A good teacher can make a difference in a classroom; a poor teacher makes little or no difference. Those are the essential truths. Ever since I've been a teacher and head teacher, we've had research into effective schools. We don't need any more research, as far as I'm concerned. We just need to make sure that those elements of research which have shown what needs to be done are followed through in the system.

ABRAMS: But even within the highest echelons of the education system, there seems to be something of a debate going on about this. The government's actually been talking a lot about diversity in education – that

parents might have very different ideas about what a good school is. What does the schools minister, Nick Gibb, think?

GIBB: It's hard to say there is a certain type that is good school and these others are not if they've all got those things in common and what we're trying to move away from as a government is this top down approach - here's a national strategy, here's a lever arch file, do this on day one and you will have a good school - that is a way of de-motivating the profession. Having said all that, when there's evidence, we should publish it so people know which factors work and which don't work.

ABRAMS: It seemed to be the view of your new head of Ofsted, who we interviewed – we do know what makes a good school, just get on and make sure they do it. You don't agree then?

GIBB: No I do agree with cert... that there are key factors strong leadership, good behaviour, high quality teachers. My point is that you can have different approaches to education that will appeal to different kinds of parents so when you say there is a good school type, and here's the model for it, that's what we don't agree with. Parents can decide if they want, you know, the traditional academic education for their children, then we must make sure that parents get that. If they want a more progressive approach, child-centred approach to education, there's a place for that and we have to deliver that for those parents that want that too.

ABRAMS: So, there's no real consensus about which model can tell us exactly what a good school is, despite all these oceans of research. And the statisticians are absolutely clear we shouldn't try to use league tables to help us choose one.

So – how should we proceed? Well – that begs a bigger question. And it's about the extent to which school really matters in the first place. Whether the enormous faith politicians have in education's ability to overcome social inequality – could be just based on a delusion?

Here's something to think about. There's a lot of academic debate about what makes a good school, but there is consensus on one issue. Time after time, serious, well-sourced studies tell us the difference schools make is very small indeed. Professor Harvey Goldstein can help - with a statistic:

GOLDSTEIN: After you've adjusted for the achievements of children when they start school, there are further effects related to their social background and to whether they're a boy or a girl, to their ethnic background. These background factors - social class, income and all the others - have very important effects very early on in childhood, and of course these persist throughout schooling.

ABRAMS: Just to be clear really. I mean how ... You've compared all those background effects to the school effect. How important is the school effect?

GOLDSTEIN: The school effect tends to be rather small. Once you've taken account of all those, maybe it accounts for 10% of what's left, which is not enormous.

ABRAMS: Let's just go over that again. About 10% of a child's life chances are actually down to his or her schooling. The other 90% is down to parents, family background, social class. Stuff that's already fixed well before your child ever goes through the school gates, clutching his Bob the Builder lunch box. In fact the biggest factor in determining whether a child succeeds at school is whether his parents succeeded at school. Put another way, what you learn at home is more important than what you learn at school.

And in the light of that I'd say you shouldn't be too worried. After all, you have made it through most of a BBC Radio 4 Analysis programme on school effectiveness - for heaven's sake. I'm guessing you're probably the kind of parent who sees the point of education and worries about homework. So on that score, you can probably relax a bit. But there is a bigger issue here for society as a whole. What about the children who don't have parents to educate them or even - get them up in the mornings?

FREDERICK: ... Because I mean I just spent [inaudible] 75 alarm clocks [inaudible] to give out to people...

ABRAMS: (over) Does that work?

FREDERICK: ... to get themselves up in the morning. Sometimes. Even though they've got their phone, you know, you put two on, you know... So you buy an alarm and give them to the parents. Because nobody's got an alarm clock. There isn't such a thing in the house.

ABRAMS: Kenny Frederick's the head of George Green's School, which is in a very poor area on London's Isle of Dogs. And for quite a few of her pupils she has to do parenting, before she can even start thinking about education.

FREDERICK: Each and every one of us who work at the school, 100% committed to making a difference to the life chances and we do make a difference. That's a fact. But it won't show in the league tables. Sometimes even looking at year 11 who are graduating and I'm looking at someone saying didn't we do well to get that child to this stage because at one point you think there's no way they're going to get through this - they'll either be permanently excluded or something awful is going to happen and it hasn't. It is much easier if you come from a middle class family where you're brought to the theatre, where you've been on holiday, where you have a sort of conversation where there's a much greater mix of vocabulary. Some areas, you could, the children could be left out on the lawn and they would do equally as well because the parents would bring in tutors and they'll have so on. Ours having nothing except us, well not nothing, but they rely on us and their parents rely on us to educate them.

ABRAMS: The school effectiveness researchers probably wouldn't be able to take account of the fact that sometimes her staff have to give

pupils a meal, or pick the nits out of their hair, before they can teach them. She accepts she's never going to iron out all the social problems her pupils face.

But not far away in another part of East London, the new Chief Inspector Michael Wilshaw takes a very different view. He thinks this kind of approach 'entrenches mediocrity'. We went to see him at Mossbourne Academy in Hackney – where he was principal till last month.

WILSHAW: You know, my view is that if you can get the culture of the school right, all sorts of other things happen.

ABRAMS: Everyone in uniform, everyone facing the front.

WILSHAW: (over) Yeah – we make a lot, we make a lot of effort to get the culture right and maintain it...

ABRAMS: Ten Mossbourne students have been offered places at Cambridge this year – and Sir Michael thinks that's at least partly because he has no truck with the idea that social factors matter more than school.

WILSHAW: If you take into account ethnicity, free school meals and a whole range of other indicators, it can, per se, give the impression that you're making excuses. You know, we've got children who come from poor backgrounds that are doing astonishingly well. If you're going to make a difference to the attainment gap, you've got to move to a no excuses culture nationally, otherwise we're never going to do it.

ABRAMS: That phrase, a 'no excuses culture' is one we're going to be hearing a lot. The English schools minister, Nick Gibb, used it too. He does accept schools can't do everything, but he doesn't think that's a reason for not pushing them very hard indeed.

GIBB: I accept the argument that parental backgrounds, family background, social background of children will also be a key determinant of what they achieve but as a government we want all children to have the best opportunities in life and the only way you'll get out of poverty as an individual, unless you win the lottery or become a premier league footballer, is through education

ABRAMS: Because the research would tell us that actually, you know, the school effect, if you like, is about 10% of a child's life chance – it is very small isn't it?

GIBB: Yes, but it's still important. And, you know, we are a government department, we spend scores of billions of pounds of taxpayers' money and we have to do what we can to close that attainment gap and one way to do that is to make sure, as far as possible, that children are achieving regardless of their background - that's all we're saying to schools - don't allow their background to determine their future.

ABRAMS: He's right, of course - education is a route out of poverty for some children. Michael Wilshaw's school isn't the only one in a deprived area to send pupils to Oxbridge – George Green's, on the Isle of Dogs, does that too. But statistically, the numbers are tiny - just 1% of Oxbridge entrants have been eligible for free school meals. Estelle Morris has spent her life, both as teacher and as government minister, trying to use education to eradicate inequality. But she comes to a rueful conclusion. Maybe schools can't do much to change the lives of most children - but they're all we've got.

MORRIS: I can remember back to my own school where really talented teachers did that term after term, year after year for kids. So they can do it for individuals, but statistically it cannot overcome those dragons of poverty and uninterested, de-motivated, dysfunctional families.

FX: School bell

ABRAMS: So, does the story end happily? Well, yes and no.

Because some schools do transform the lives, of some children from poor backgrounds. But teachers like Kenny Frederick on the Isle of Dogs have to have amazing grit and energy and faith in the power of their schools, to make that difference. And you can't just create exceptional people like her using school effectiveness models, or league tables. The sad truth is that not all schools can be straight-A schools - and not all kids can be straight-A kids.

And yet – here's the rub – we need teachers to believe the lie – that they can make a difference, every day of every school term. Because otherwise they'd never try. And then, they'd always fail.

So, before we go - we should stand up and raise three cheers - for all the hopeless optimists in the teaching profession. Hip hip...