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Pearson Stakeholders' Report

Pearson PLC is the world's largest education company, operating in more than 70 countries, providing learning materials, assessments and education-related services to governments, schools, teachers, parents and students. Its mission is to "empower people to progress in their lives through learning," and in doing so, it seeks to earn a significant return on the $5 trillion that is spent globally on education each year (Pearson, 2014). Already, Pearson generates billions of dollars in annual sales, and in 2015, it made more than $1 billion in profit (Pearson, 2016). However, despite CEO John Fallon's claims that Pearson is helping to improve student learning outcomes and increase access to quality education by being a "profitable and cash generative company," we argue that its current business strategy is undermining the very fabric of public education.

Pearson's business strategy: Education commercialization

Pearson's business strategy is built on the idea that education is a commodity that can be bought and sold. And, since the turn of the 21st century and the rise of neoliberal governance, this is increasingly true (see Apple, 2013; Au & Ferrare, 2015; Ball, 2012; Ball & Junemann, 2012; Burch, 2009; Hursh, 2016; Ravitch, 2010; Reckhow, 2013; Verger, Lubienski & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). Governments are now committed to marketized "solutions" to education "problems" because there is an underpinning logic that privatization is best for increasing efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery. This has opened the public policy space to rich and powerful players who tend to have economic rather than social interests at heart. Philanthropies, foundations, corporations and entrepreneurs now play a key role in steering education policy, developing curriculum and assessment, and even running schools.

Pearson is one of these powerful players.

Over the past decade, Pearson has been working to streamline its businesses to take advantage of the rapidly expanding education services industry.[1] This quest began with former CEO Marjorie Scardino and continues today under Fallon. Also instrumental to Pearson's restructuring is the role of Chief Education Advisor Sir Michael Barber, who was appointed in 2011 largely to orchestrate Pearson's global strategy for education. As Scardino said about the appointment at the time: "Michael Barber has deep experience in and an irrepressible passion for education. … And both of us want to make education more effective for more people because we believe that makes societies more effective." Barber also commented on his move, saying: "The opportunity for governments and businesses to transform learning outcomes for people of all ages has never been greater—and the need to do so never more urgent. The combination of public with private; technology with teaching; and evidence of what works with innovation are

[1] Pearson was established in 1844 as a construction company in London. In the 1920s, it expanded its operations and became a diversified holding company of various entities, including the Lazard investment bank, the Château Latour winery and the Madame Tussaud wax museum. From the 1950s onward, Pearson began to focus on the next big thing: media and publishing. Historically, Pearson has always been a global leader in the provision of education textbooks, but at the turn of the 21st century, with the acquisition of the United States' leading testing company, National Computer Systems (for $2.5 billion), and the sale of Lazard and Tussaud, Pearson began its move to focus solely on education services. Since then, Pearson has been engaged in a series of high-profile acquisitions, mergers and trade-offs. Chief among these was the merger of Penguin with Random House, the sale of Mergermarket, and, more recently, the sale of the *Financial Times* and the *Economist*. The sale of assets has been used to go deeper into education, with acquisitions like Grupo Multi, which saw Pearson become the market leader for English language teaching in Brazil.

the keys to unlocking human potential around the world in the next decade. Pearson can be at the heart of enabling that to happen" (Pearson, 2011).

With Barber and his commentary, we see clearly the business strategy of Pearson. There is no doubt that Pearson positions itself as a socially responsible business that has the power to change the world for the better (see Hogan, Sellar & Lingard, 2015). In fact, this is a key rationale underpinning Pearson's increasing focus on the education needs of the developing world. As explained by Fallon in Pearson's 2013 annual report, "the world fails to meet the learning needs of far too many of our fellow citizens," but Pearson "has a unique set of advantages with which to help meet this global demand for better education and skills," and by being able to meet this challenge, Pearson "can build a stronger, more profitable and faster growing company" (p.9). The latter part of this quote gives rise to the real reason that Pearson is now investing so substantially in sales outside of historically strong core markets like North America and the United Kingdom. Indeed, Fallon himself points out that it is a decision "fuelled by a remarkable socio-economic trend," where "in this decade, the global middle class will almost double in size to more than three billion people," and that as these "consumers join the middle class and earn higher incomes, they tend to invest more in education" to either advance their own lives or the lives of their children (Pearson, 2012, p.8). This highlights the deep concern that parents, teachers, members of civil society and students themselves have of Pearson. Its business strategy might be thinly veiled as contributing to the social good, but the very fact that Pearson can use parents' desire for a better world for their children as a profit motive has significant implications that leaves Pearson standing on shaky moral ground.

In fact, Pearson is currently confronting a crisis of its public image, not only through its work in the countries of the Global South, but also through its plagued assessment work in the countries of the Global North, particularly in the United States. Social commentators tend to view the work of Pearson as an attempt to monopolize the global education market. The popular and influential education policy actor Diane Ravitch, who was an assistant secretary of education in President George H.W. Bush's administration, is particularly outspoken about what she sees as the "Pearsonization" of American schools and students, observing that "it is widely recognized by everyone other than Pearson that its tentacles have grown too long and too aggressive." However, it is now impossible for Pearson to ignore the building criticism against its activities.

Despite a £220 million restructure to focus on education, Pearson has failed to capitalize on its new business plan. In Pearson's 2014 annual report, Fallon thanks shareholders for their patience with the restructure and promises that in 2015, Pearson's profits will start to "grow again" as the transition is completed and Pearson's new education work stabilizes. Yet, in the recent release of its 2015 results, we see that this has not been the case, and if anything, the woes continue to deepen. Pearson has had four profit warnings in three years, and in 2015, it suffered a dramatic 40 percent stock decline. Fallon recently announced a plan to cut 4,000 jobs, or 10 percent of Pearson's global workforce, to help generate £350 million in savings by 2018. He believes that Pearson has been working against "cyclical and policy-related factors" that have been "more pronounced and extended than we expected." He suggests that these factors include the drop in U.S. college enrollments, changes in school accountability measures in England and Wales, and a significant reduction in textbook sales, especially in South Africa. And to be fair, these are genuine factors that have affected Pearson's performance. However, as Liberum analyst Ian Whittaker argues, even if these markets stabilize for Pearson, its brand has become so toxic that its prospects for future growth are slim.

Brand is everything for companies like Pearson, as it represents the ultimate manifestation of a company's relationship with the market. A well-known brand signifies that a company has a sustainable, competitive advantage, where customers believe it is the best, most reliable service or product on offer. Customers base their assertions on their perceptions of the company and their beliefs about its reputation and integrity. Brand success is earned, but most importantly, it must be maintained. This is especially important in commodity markets like education, where competing brands that offer similar services are substitutable. Thus, if anything begins to erode customers' beliefs or trust in a brand, they will look elsewhere for the same service. We believe that Pearson's current business strategy, and specifically its focus on high-stakes testing in the Global North and low-fee private schools in the Global South, is contaminating its brand and its future prospects for competing successfully in the global education industry.

High-stakes testing

Pearson administered 50 million standardised tests in the United States *alone* last year. This statistic grows exponentially if we also consider its assessment work in other countries of the Global North. Assessment has been one of the most successful business practices for Pearson over the past decade. But, lately, Pearson's assessment business has started to suffer. Pearson would have us believe that it has been temporarily affected by cyclical and policy-related factors. And in some ways, Pearson is correct. Consider here the political changes that occurred at the turn of the 21st century that placed testing and accountability infrastructures at the heart of schooling. Prominent American researchers like Patricia Burch (2009) maintain that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and its mandate for annual testing and related sanctions based on test score performance, worked to open the space for for-profit education providers to prosper.[2]

Similarly, Finnish education expert Pasi Sahlberg (2007; 2009; 2010; 2012; 2014) describes the popularity of high-stakes testing as part of the Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM, which has operated like an epidemic, infecting national education systems around the world. As he explains, GERM has worked to shift the focus of improving education toward basic knowledge in some core subjects, the creation of common standards for teaching and learning, and stronger teacher accountability for results. Private providers have been able to leverage this high-stakes context for commercialisation. Burch (2009) argues that with the advent of standardised testing, the education market was reinvented around test development and preparation, data analysis and management, and the related provision of online curricular and remedial services in an attempt to improve students' performance outcomes.

Yet, the evidence suggests that standardized testing has failed to improve education outcomes and decrease economic and racial inequalities (Hursh, 2016; Ravitch, 2013; Sahlberg, 2010). In fact, standardized testing has been blamed for narrowing and simplifying curricula and undermining both teaching and learning. Sahlberg makes the argument that there is growing evidence to suggest that high-stakes testing is restricting students' conceptual learning and their ability to engage in creative action and understand innovation. This all leads to an "education deficit" (Giroux, 2012).

The ways that tests have been used as an accountability mechanism are also hugely problematic for both students and teachers. As the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development noted in *Lessons from PISA 2012 for the United States*, assessments in the United States are often used purely for accountability purposes, despite the fact that most higher-performing countries tend to use the results to guide intervention, reveal best practices and identify shared problems. For teachers, parents and students, the continued misalignment between the rationale for standardized testing and the real-life effects of it in practice has caused many to join the testing opt-out movement across the United States. These stakeholders have decided that enough is

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[2] As Burch writes: "NCLB has helped firms providing an array of accountability products—including test development, after-school tutoring, and pre-packaged, online curriculum—to make fast and deeper inroads into local markets" (p.120). Moreover, and perhaps more telling to how important standardised assessment is to businesses like Pearson, Burch reports that since the adoption of NCLB, firms show a dramatic increase in sales, with sales across the top assessment vendors doubling, on average, from 2000 to 2006.

enough. In New York in 2015, more than 240,000 students in grades 3-8 refused to take part in the state's Common Core assessments (NYSAPE, 2016).

In what was a win for teachers and students, the U.S. federal government shifted its focus away from standardized testing with its recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act. While the law still requires a 95 percent participation rate in student testing, states have more autonomy in defining how that works in terms of what assessments they use and what standards they choose to assess. This move has obvious consequences for Pearson. Without a Common Core curriculum or nationally defined standards, many of the large-scale tests developed by Pearson for national use would no longer be needed. Pearson's high-priced assessments must now face increasing competition from lower-cost alternatives, and, of course, cash-strapped states will likely move to other suppliers. Already, Pearson has lost assessment contracts in Florida ($220 million), Texas ($340 million), Ohio ($26 million) and New York ($32 million). Renewed contracts went to other businesses, including the American Institutes for Research, Educational Testing Service and Questar Assessment Inc.

The problem for Pearson here is not just policy related. At the end of the day, the Every Student Succeeds Act still requires student testing. The issue for Pearson is the controversies that continue to damage its assessment brand, creating issues for customers in how they perceive and trust Pearson to deliver exactly what they're paying for. These controversies include "pineapplegate," the claims about the improper influencing of state education officials, the gagging provisions placed on schools and teachers, the monitoring of student comments on social media, and the viral segment on John Oliver's "Last Week Tonight" program, in which Pearson is called out for its inappropriate role and influence on U.S. testing. Poorly constructed assessment items, glitches that shut down state testing and entirely botched tests (like the GED) do not bode well for Pearson maintaining, let alone improving, its current assessment work in the United States. Indeed, Geoff Decker argues that states are beginning to distance themselves from Pearson and its checkered testing history.

Pearson is aware that its assessment business is under fire, but it is set on embracing the notion of "fewer, better assessments" to curb this problem. This implies a shift from pencil-and-paper tests to online tests and continuous collection of student data. In explaining its new assessment strategy, Pearson provides a sole example of what this might look like in the form of *SimCityEdu*, which seems to suggest that teachers can gather illuminating data on their students by tracking and analysing how they play the game. This is a potentially interesting development, where assessment data is constructed as a way to help teachers improve their instruction and identify the individual needs of their students, rather than as a high-stakes accountability mechanism. The issue moving forward with the "promise" of these new technologies is that they face a plethora of critical issues before they become mainstream and a regular feature in classrooms. There are technical issues surrounding student privacy, data security and the ways in which data might be misappropriated in various ways. But there are also serious concerns here about expertise—the idea that we would be allowing decisions to be made about our children by a predetermined algorithm rather than a trained and accredited teacher. Pearson does not need to "take over" the work of teachers. Instead, it needs to work with teachers, trust teachers and embrace their pedagogical expertise.

Low-fee private schools

Another business practice that is affecting Pearson's brand is its support of low-fee private schools (LFPS). Pearson's rationale for investing in low-fee private schools is based on the charitable notion that it is delivering an education with potentially better outcomes to students in countries where access to public education is limited or nonexistent. A substantial $80 million investment has been made through the Pearson Affordable Learning Fund to support LFPS chains. The fund makes equity investments in the likes of Omega Schools in Ghana, APEC Schools in the Philippines, SPARK Schools in South Africa, Lekki Peninsula Affordable Schools in Nigeria and Bridge International Academies, which started in Kenya but now operates hundreds of schools in various locations, with a new academy opening every 2.5 days. As Pearson insists, "These investments will help to improve educational access and outcomes in countries where provision is poor or lacking, and will improve Pearson's access to low-cost innovative educational products and services, creating long-term returns for our shareholders."

In his book *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*, C.K. Prahalad writes that the fastest-growing market is "at the bottom of the pyramid"—that is, among the poorest—where such people have collective "untapped buying power." In supporting edu-preneurs in establishing low-fee private schools, Pearson has accepted the insights of Prahalad. Yet, while such schools might be low fee, they constitute a high percentage of the disposable income of poor families, often resulting in gender discrimination where boys' education is given priority over girls' education in the same family. These schools are also challenging the aspiration that a free, high-quality public education for all is central to democracy and a socially just society. Furthermore, there is little evidence to support the effectiveness of low-fee for-profit schools. The major concern then is that Pearson is using parents' desire to give their children a better life as a profit motive. This not only positions Pearson as a global education pariah but has serious and lasting implications on families, teachers, students and democracy in the emerging world.

There is very little evidence supporting the fact that low-fee private schools deliver better outcomes for students. Researchers like Joanna Harma (2013) argue that it is difficult to establish teaching and learning outcomes in these schools, and that most parents choose them based on subjective perceptions rather than objective measures of student outcomes. Other studies have found that there is no real private school advantage in these contexts (Chudgar & Quin, 2012). Part of why it is so difficult to measure LFPS quality is the fact that these schools operate on a business model of generating profits by relying on the employment of underqualified, poorly paid, nonunion teachers who use scripted pedagogies (Riep, 2015; Edwards, Klees & Wildish, 2015; Junemann & Ball, 2015).

Riep (2015) reports that APEC teachers in the Philippines are paid PHP12,500 ($260 USD) a month, which is 50 percent less than the average salary of public school teachers in the country and puts APEC teachers in the second-lowest socio-economic classification. Bridge co-founder Shannon May says this model is the underpinning "magic" of low-fee private schools. As she explains, using standardized lessons that teachers read word for word allows Bridge to hire teachers who do not need college degrees. Thus, regardless of which of the 200 Bridge schools you attended in Kenya, you would be seeing the exact same lesson, at the same time. Similarly, the Department of Education in the Philippines has permitted APEC to conduct its business despite the fact that 70 percent of APEC teachers, or "learning facilitators," do not have the proper professional accreditation to teach. Like in Kenya, this means that APEC teachers are given lesson guides to cover and activities to follow. Riep reports that an APEC administrator said, "We ask teachers not to deviate from the lesson guide because it can provide inconsistency across the chain and we don't know if all teachers are equipped to do it otherwise" (p.29).

On top of employing underqualified and underpaid teachers, low-fee private schools allow high teacher-student ratios. For example, in some schools in Kenya, there can be 60-90 students in one class (Cheng & Kariithi, 2008, cited in Edwards et al., 2015). While the impact of class size on student outcomes has always been a contentious issue, a 2014 report from the U.S. National Education Policy Center—*Does Class Size Matter?*—concludes that "research supports the common-sense notion that children learn more and teachers are more effective in smaller classes." The report also states that "money saved today by increasing class sizes will be offset by more substantial social and educational costs in the future" (p.10). There are also concerns about the lack of facilities and resources available to low-fee private schools. As Jonathan Stern and Stephen Heyneman observe in the book Stern and Heyneman (2013, p.111), low-fee private schools in Kenya are "generally housed in small rented buildings or semi-permanent structures, electricity being an uncommon luxury, and facilities are typically not up to the standards of public primary schools." This means that the schools lack adequate facilitates, with little or no space for libraries, gymnasiums, and science and computer laboratories (Reip, 2015). Given that low-fee private schools also commonly lack sufficient teaching and learning resources (Srivastava, 2013), these schools actually represent schools of low quality.

These schools also represent low equity. In a recent statement to the United Nations General Assembly, Kishore Singh, a U.N. special rapporteur, insists that low-fee private schools "not only constrain social justice in education, but also limit social justice through education," meaning that this approach actually makes social justice worse. Access to education in low-fee private schools is based on the capacity to pay fees, which for many families are exorbitant. For example, Omega Schools in Ghana operates on a "pay as you learn system" in which parents must pay a daily school fee of approximately 65 cents per child. This equates to 25-40 percent of the daily income for low-income families in Ghana to send *one* of their children to an Omega school. Similarly, Riep (2015) reports that APEC Schools in the Philippines has an annual fee of $500 USD per student, which equates to 40 percent of the annual household income in the country, while the average number of children per household is three. This works to perpetuate gender inequality and, more broadly, represents the erosion of children's basic human right to a free education.

Pearson's support of low-fee private schools sits in stark moral contradiction to its mission as a socially responsible business and its strong support of the "quality teachers" agenda in the nations of the Global North. It is essentially ensuring that a large number of the world's most vulnerable children have no hope for a free, high-quality education. Low-fee private schools actually target systems and take advantage of governments that are struggling with the capacity to deliver public education. James Tooley, the head of Omega Schools, explains that they have not been entirely successful in India because the regulatory environment "is a big problem there." As Tooley continues, India is "not conducive to for-profit education. And that's why we're focusing for now in Africa where it's much easier to do business" in education. Low-fee private schools do not support public schools; they sit in direct competition with them.

The bottom line of low-fee private schools is profit, not social good. If Pearson continues to support these schools, it is contributing to the degradation of democracy and basic human rights, and it is being complicit in equity and justice issues that are contradictory to its stance as a socially responsible business. We believe this is a morally corrupt business strategy, and one that is a serious threat to Pearson's future brand success. Shareholders and all education stakeholders have the right to be outraged. Education is, and should always be, a right, not a privilege of those who can afford it. There is a growing sense of unease in the developed and developing world about Pearson's involvement in making education a commodity for those most in need.

Conclusion

We now live in a world of increasing privatization and commercialization, where businesses play an influential role in public service delivery. Yet, research tells us that the broad application of market principles to the provision of education has a negative impact on teaching and learning, whether it is in the countries of the Global North, with high-stakes testing and accountability infrastructures, or in the countries of the Global South, where low-fee private schools are working to erode democracy and basic human rights. In both these examples, the public governance of education is being compromised, and prominence is being given to education as a commodity that can be bought and sold as a private, positional good. Moreover, the work of corporate actors operating in these spaces has, in many instances, replaced the traditional role of government in the provision of schooling and related education services. The concern here is that corporate actors like Pearson are unelected and unaccountable to a constituency and thus do not necessarily work to protect students, teachers and quality education for all. Instead, they tend to focus on profit margins and potential returns for shareholders, regardless of the consequences.

Obviously, governments need to respond to this and begin to create legislative frameworks around the private provision of schooling. In some ways, we might consider the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act in the United States a positive step in this direction. As discussed, this law has implications for Pearson, and we have already seen adverse consequences related to its assessment business. Students, teachers and parents stood up and demanded change, and policymakers finally listened. It is now up to Pearson to respond to this policy development and transform its assessment business for the better, and to work with education stakeholders to truly put the well-being of students and teachers first. If Pearson can successfully do this, and develop meaningful and effective assessment products, then perhaps its claim that it is working to improve public schooling will be less contentious.

Pearson has the opportunity to rebuild its brand by turning its back on high-stakes testing. It has effectively been forced to consider alternative assessment strategies by policy changes in the United States and elsewhere. It must also withdraw its support for low-fee private schools. However, low-fee private schools are set up in countries where there is limited government oversight, so Pearson needs to address its moral compass and decide whether making a short-term profit off the world's most vulnerable populations is worth the long-term consequences to its brand success. Pearson needs the conviction to stand up and truly invest in its claims that it is a socially responsible business committed to empowering all lives through learning. If this were true, Pearson would be calling on all governments throughout the world to invest in public education. It would truly believe that schools should not be used as a marketplace for commercial self-interest. And, it would promote the principles of educational access and equity for all young people and protect the democratic rights of teachers and students.

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