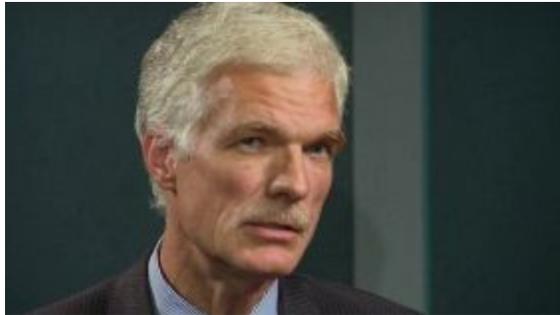




In September of 2015, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD, released a study that found no correlation between the use of computers in schools and student performance in PISA. The report, which included data from 31

countries, also found that computer and internet use in schools did nothing to close socioeconomic achievement gaps. As with many findings involving huge data sets, multiple conclusions can be drawn. Predictably, most policy makers are drawing incorrect ones.



A BBC report on the study had two “opposing viewpoints” on the data, presumably to satisfy a need for controversy and/or “equal time.” The most obvious implication of the study is that there’s no reason for schools to invest in computers, and should continue to rely on industrial age methods of teaching and communication. This viewpoint was

championed by OECD’s education director Andreas Schleicher. He believes that “classroom technology can be a distraction and result in pupils cutting and pasting “prefabricated” homework answers from the internet.” (BBC 2015) His view does allow for some modernity to be used in the classroom, however: “Digital textbooks which can be updated as an example of how online technology could be better than traditional methods.” (BBC, 2015) Mark Chambers, the director of NAACE, a UK Educational Technology advocacy organization, holds a different viewpoint: “When people say too much money is being spent on technology in school, my response is ‘Nonsense’. What we need is more money, more investment.” (BBC, 2015). He asserts that students are using the internet at home, and will be using it in the future, so schools should be “leading, not following” when it comes to using digital technology.

I think that both viewpoints are wrong, and don’t even come close to addressing the real issue. Both assertions seem to contend that computers are either effective or ineffective solutions, and not tools. Because of their complexity and cost, we tend to treat digital hardware differently than other tools, but that does not change their fundamental nature.



Imagine a study with this finding: “Greater investment in pencils does not lead to increased student performance.” How you use the tool is what matters – not necessarily how many tools you have. Chambers simply seems to be advocating for more money and investment to be thrown at schools, which will not, by itself, increase

test scores – the very study he is commenting on proves that. Schleicher, on the other hand, despite being the head of OECD, seems to completely misunderstand the potential and capabilities of what we can do with computers in the classroom. His reluctant agreement that computers can be used as “digital textbooks which can be updated” belies an industrial mindset that views modern tools as nothing more than more convenient versions of old ones.

Investment in computers and other hardware in school needs to be matched with proper training for teachers and administrators. Simply having a tech training half-day at the beginning of the school year so that teachers know how to input grades and assessments into powerschool will not increase student performance. Instead, schools need to invest heavily in pedagogical training with those tools so that teachers can make better use of what they are capable of. This, of course, is expensive and time consuming, and is far more difficult to implement than the allocation of money to purchase computers. I am hoping, however, that districts and policymakers will at least begin realize that computers (like pencils) are not the answer – learning how to use them is.

Image credits:

Andreas Schleicher. Photo credit: BBC

Mark Chambers. Photo Credit: BBC