



Study questions 'teacher effects'

An international team of researchers led by Professor Brian Byrne from the University of New England has found that quality of teaching accounts for eight per cent of the variation in children's learning in their first three years at school, lower than research claims that it accounts for 30 to 40 per cent of the variation.

Byrne's team has followed about 500 pairs of identical twins in Australia and the United States through their first three years of schooling.

As identical twins share the same genetically-determined native ability, live in the same household and attend the same school, they should – if teachers have the large effect sometimes claimed for them – progress, on average, at different rates when one twin is in a different classroom from the other.

For around half of the pairs of twins in the study, both children had the same teacher, while for the other half, each of the two children had a different teacher. The researchers found that the difference in literacy levels between twins who had different teachers was only eight per cent greater than that between twins who had the same teacher. According to Byrne, 'It's not the kind of difference you would expect if 40 per cent of the variance in children's reading and spelling could be attributed to teachers.'

Byrne says the study findings suggest that 'teachers are more similar than different in the quality of literacy instruction they deliver, and, because Australia does pretty well in international comparisons of literacy, that quality appears to be of a good standard overall.'

League table argy-bargy

DEBATE OVER SCHOOL LEAGUE TABLES IS HOTTING UP, REPORTS STEVE HOLDEN.

Australia's Commonwealth, state and territory Education Ministers agreed back in April to ensure 'that schools provide clear performance reporting to parents, carers and to their local communities' in the form of nationally consistent information about each school's results, workforce, financial resources and student population, but stand by for some argy-bargy as that agreement closes in on an implementation date.

In New South Wales in June, the opposition Coalition, with cross-bench support, managed to win a parliamentary vote to ban newspapers from publishing league tables.

No worries, Commonwealth Minister for Education Julia Gillard told Channel 10's *Meet the Press*. She would put the data on the performance of NSW schools in national tests, rated against the performance of other schools, on a website instead.

Speaking in June ahead of a series of nation-wide seminars for school leaders on the use of student achievement data in July, the chief executive of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), Professor Geoff Masters, said Australia had the opportunity to learn from overseas experience and avoid simple but problematic approaches to the construction of school league tables.

'If test results of all schools are reported in a simple league table, it is difficult for readers to know whether differences between schools are due to the quality of teaching or to differences in the populations they serve,' Professor Masters said.

An alternative, Professor Masters suggested, is to report actual test results and, if these are to be compared, to restrict comparisons to schools in similar circumstances and with similar student intakes.

According to Trevor Cobbold, an economist for the Australian Productivity Commission for more than 30 years and national

convenor of the Save Our Schools public education advocacy group, a Save Our Schools study released in August shows that the Commonwealth government's proposed school comparisons for local areas would compare rich schools with poor ones.

Back in August last year, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, speaking at the National Press Club, described a national league table as, 'One which would try and line up a comprehensive government school in the outer suburbs of, you know, Brisbane, Sydney or Melbourne with the likes of Geelong Grammar and the rest. Far better it is that instead you have a system whereby schools which broadly have common characteristics, common socioeconomic profile across the country within government and non-government systems for that data to be readily comparable. That's what we're talking about.'

Trevor Cobbold isn't so sure. 'Our study shows that the PM's promise that government schools in disadvantaged areas would not be compared with the "likes of Geelong Grammar and the rest" is completely false,' he said.

'A local area school performance table for Northern Geelong will compare one of the richest schools in Australia – Geelong Grammar – with government and Catholic schools in Corio and Norlane, which... serve communities with high levels of public housing, a large migrant population, low education and high unemployment.'

Cobbold, called on the Commonwealth Minister for Education to ditch the publication of school comparisons in local areas.

'The argy-bargy on this is going to be significant with the states,' Rudd told the National Press Club last year. 'We accept that,' he added, 'but we intend to prosecute this and we have some way to go yet.'

Quite.

International education

ATTACKS ON STUDENTS, COLLEGE CLOSURES AND ALLEGATIONS OF RIP-OFFS ARE DAMAGING AUSTRALIA'S REPUTATION AS AN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION PROVIDER. **STEVE HOLDEN** REPORTS.

Damage to Australia's reputation as an international education provider began in May after four Indian students were attacked with a screwdriver by gatecrashers at a party in Hadfield in Melbourne's north, while another, Baljinder Singh, was stabbed in the stomach with a screwdriver by two men who robbed him in Carnegie in Melbourne's south east. Those attacks and subsequent protests in Melbourne and Sydney were followed in July by allegations of rip-offs by private colleges, after ABC television's *Four Corners* broadcast Wendy Carlisle's 'Holy cash cows' report on the alleged exploitation of international students.

The international education sector took yet another hit when Sterling College, a vocational college for overseas students in Sydney, went into voluntary administration in July, affecting about 600 international

students and 35 teachers who were locked out of the college without notice. The New South Wales government found in May that the college had breached regulations and banned it from offering some courses after complaints by students and staff.

The closure, which came after Carlisle's *Four Corners* report, wasn't the only one. Sydney's Aerospace Aviation, a pilot training school, was closed down after the NSW Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board (VETAB) deregistered it in August to prevent it teaching overseas trainee pilots because of a critical breach of standards. In a statement, Aerospace Aviation said it would appeal the VETAB decision. Several Aerospace Aviation students told Carlisle they had paid thousands of dollars in tuition fees to Aerospace Aviation, but were left without qualifications.

The Australian Council for Private Education and Training, through its Tuition Assurance Scheme, is working with other member institutions to transfer students affected by the closures.

According to Carlisle, 'Australia's education exports face much deeper problems than safety issues: there's now a rising clamour over dodgy courses, student rip-offs and an education system that's turned into a visa factory' – and international education is a big business.

Figures from Australian Education International, the international arm of the Commonwealth government's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, indicate that international education activity is Australia's largest services export industry, contributing \$14.2 billion in export income to the Australian economy in 2007-08.

Visiting Australia in August, Indian External Affairs Minister Somanahalli Mallaiah Krishna said he was satisfied that Indian students were safe in Australia after he met NSW Premier Nathan Rees. 'He has reassured me that there will not be any slip up,' Krishna told ABC *Radio National*.

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