

Theme 1: Equity in Australian schools

Chair's response: Associate Professor Louise Watson, University of Canberra

I just want to make a few comments about what the research says on equity and education issues and, as Richard pointed out in his talk, that Australia is what the OECD would call a 'high quality but low equity' country on international comparisons, and that the high-quality, high-equity countries like Sweden and Finland, have different education systems to ours and they also top the league tables.

In a sense, it's Australia's low performance on equity that drags us down a lot in the international league tables, and it's something that we should be giving a lot of thought to. We can learn some things from Finland.

What does a high quality and a high equity education system look like?

The Finnish education system is different to ours in several key respects, and a study by McKinsey & Company, published in 2007, highlights this very nicely.

McKinsey came up with three characteristics of high-equity, high-quality education systems. The first is that they are highly selective in who they recruit to the teaching profession.

In Finland, only the top 10% of the university graduates are admitted to teaching education courses. It's a very different system of teacher training and teacher preparation to the one we have here, where - forgive me, and I'm from a university and shouldn't probably be saying this - teacher education courses are often treated as cash cows by universities, with high throughput, relatively low cost and a lot of the students in them are taking the courses as a fallback option for a second-chance career. It's very different to a system like Finland's, where they are interviewed for their motivation and communication skills, as well as taking into account their high marks.

We've got a lot to do to change our teacher education system before we have one that looks a bit like Finland's.

The second thing that the Finnish education system does is that it invests heavily in teacher training, as I've mentioned, but also professional learning throughout a teacher's career, and a lot of this takes place within schools. Teachers are given the time and the resources to meet and collaborate and work in professional unities that are far better supported than what we see in Australia.

The third thing that high-quality, high-equity systems do, is that they target resources to children most in need of assistance.

As Richard said, we are all in support of equity, but when you actually look at what happens on the ground, it's clear some people support it a bit more than others.

In Finland, 30% of students in every year level of schooling receive special assistance. They are withdrawn from class and they receive one-on-one tuition through tutoring or small group tuition in special-needs classes, and this is all triggered by students who are falling behind acceptable norms of achievement.

Because there's 30% of them, it's actually not such a big stigma to get withdrawn from class and go to a special education teacher. They call them 'special education teachers', and it all happens within the school. There's one of these teachers for every seven normal teachers employed, and they are specialists, in that they are given an additional year of training in this field.

And the Finns even make a special effort to send very high achieving students to these special education classes as well, just to reduce the stigma attached - any potential for stigma being attached to it. So it's a very, very intensive, resource-intensive level of intervention that goes into getting Finnish students to the top of those league tables, and it's a highly equitable one that is probably responsible for that change in the relationship between equity and—between educational outcomes and socio economic background that Richard referred to.

So I think we've got some way to go in Australia, in terms of achieving equity in educational outcomes—and we've talked a lot this morning. A lot of the current reform agenda is, however, targeted towards this, and we've heard about the reforms on the table, the ambitious reforms on the table this morning, and what Michelle refers to as the 'intense and demanding collaborations' that are taking place to pursue this reform, and as a former Federal bureaucrat myself, I have great sympathy for Michelle in engaging in those intense and demanding collaborations.

But, we have to remember that we've had a lot of reforms in education, and there's a great analogy that suggests that systematic reform has a similar affect to a storm at sea. In a storm at sea there's a lot of activity on the surface—there's a lot of wind, white water, waves, a lot of movement—but once you drop below the level of the surface, the ocean's still quite calm, quiet. Nothing much has changed, and it's even a bit murky.

A bit like classrooms. We don't really understand a lot about what happens down there, or in them, and the challenge—the real challenge in pursuing an equity agenda, where we really want to do something about equity—is how do we generate activity on the ocean floor, how do we change the practices in classrooms and in schools in ways that will promote student learning for disadvantaged groups of students.

Stephen Raudenbush from the University of Chicago says we have to be more systematic about how we do teaching and learning in schools. He describes the practice of education, the practice of teaching, as 'privatised and idiosyncratic', and he's referring to the fact that a lot of what we do in teaching goes on behind closed doors. And he says—and I think this is

consistent with what happens in Finland—that teaching practice has to be ‘shared, explicit and collaborative’, and teachers should be like doctors: working in professional teams where they scrutinise each other's practice, make collective decisions, and work together to improve student learning based on evidence. He says as long as we allow teaching practice to be privatised and idiosyncratic, we'll continue to see large variations in outcomes related to socioeconomic background, we won't see the reductions in inequality that we want to see. This view is quite common in the literature, in some of the literature now on equity.

Another American (unfortunately), Douglas Reeves from the Massachusetts Leadership and Learning Centre, also says that he has done a lot of studies on high performing schools that serve very disadvantaged communities, and in America they have lots of examples to study—more than here.

Reeves' research, on these schools that succeed in raising the attainment levels of disadvantaged students, identifies three key elements to their success. Firstly, again, the high levels of professional collegiality and collaboration—the teachers work in teams to address the student learning.

Secondly, there is a regular, consistent and meaningful assessment of student performance at the school level, and this is not a NAPLAN test, this is not standardised tests, it's the test or the assessments that teachers do as part of their practice regularly; it's more systematic, and it's shared, and teachers work together on working out how to address particular shortfalls in performance.

And, thirdly, again, reflecting Finland, there's high levels of in-school support for students identified through these processes of being at risk of failure.

So it's a sort of micro-level level of assessment where students are monitored quite closely in a meaningful way, and interventions are targeted on time and on site to address perceived inefficiencies, and—I am not suggesting any of this can happen without more money—the sort of examples that Reeves talks about, and the few schools I have seen in Australia where this sort of practice occurs, tend to be very well resourced, at a higher level than our average schools would be resourced today.

There's so much you can do with reprioritising, but we do have to make sure that the money targeted for equity to achieve this education revolution does actually get to the schools and to the students, where it's needed most.

So, just to summarise, I think the research suggests that we can. The research does show some ways ahead for meeting our equity goals, but we do have to think about whole-scale reform at all levels of the system, not just at the surface, and it's getting below the surface to the ocean floor, to changing the practices in classrooms, at schools. That is the really hard stuff, the real long-haul stuff that Richard talked about, that we can't be sure will succeed, but we have to give it a go.

And there's a fair bit of concurrence in the literature about what needs to be done. At the system level we need to invest in high-quality teaching, particularly, in my view, the reform of teacher education; higher levels of professional support, again for teachers in schools. All research over the years has shown that the best PD happens in schools on site, even in your own classroom. It's the most expensive, but it is the most effective, and we need a systematic approach to targetting students in need.

That's all at the system level, and at the school-level teachers and school leaders really have to come on board and think about ways of 'de-privatising' teaching practice and, firstly, make teaching a more open and collaborative process at the school level.

Secondly they need to use regular meaningful and consistent measures of student assessment to inform their work and to inform their professional dialogues and, finally, they need to use this information to make timely and intensive support available for students as they need it.

It's a simple little list of things, but you, as teachers and school leaders, would know how hard it actually is to make that happen, and I guess that's what we have to acknowledge at this point, that it is going to be hard, and that it's only through working in partnerships with schools and with teachers that governments will be able to achieve their equity agenda.