

League tables short-change students and ignore the important family context

Fatima Measham, 15 July 2009

Since the OECD started testing students worldwide through its Program for International Student Assessment, Finland has been adjudged to have the best education system among developed countries. So when a member of the Finnish Board of Education criticises the practice of national testing and ranking of school performance, as Pirjo Sinko did at a gathering of literacy experts in Hobart last week, it's worth taking notice.

Many educators were already disturbed by Federal Government moves to make school performance 'transparent' to parents. The New South Wales Teachers Federation, as well as the South Australian branch of the Australian Education Union, have recently committed themselves actively to oppose the use of national test results to rank schools. According to federation president Bob Lipscombe, league tables reflect 'a lack of respect for the profession'.

It would be easy enough to dismiss his statement as sentimental. Many might argue that how teachers feel about their job is not as important as producing comparative data on schools for the purpose of providing information to consumers.

But if we're going to talk about 'best value for money', we should note that studies show a reciprocal link between teacher morale and student achievement. This suggests that publicising data to lift student achievement may actually be counterproductive if it leads to demoralisation within the teaching profession.

The proposal highlights a weakness in the Australian education system. Relationships between stakeholders are adversarial. Education is no longer the great social enterprise it once was, when parents and governments worked to support schools in their function within the community. Instead, much of the argument for league tables focuses on the right of parents to choose the right school for their children.

This is a false argument because parents are able to make this choice, and have been making such choices, without league tables. It is also a dangerous argument because it sets up a culture of hostility towards schools and teachers, in which parents are always right.

This is a far cry from the situation in Finland, where, in the words of its foremost education expert, Dr Reijo Laukkanen, 'We can trust that [teachers] are competent. They know what to do.' Nobody will be surprised to know that the morale of Finnish teachers is high.

The most concerning feature of the arguments about parental choice and school accountability is that they do not address the role that families play in children's achievement at school. Values, attitudes and expectations — the 'curriculum of the home' — greatly influence a child's preparedness for learning. In a practical sense, parents determine how their children perform at school well before the teacher even gets a chance.

For instance, it matters whether parents provide proper nutrition, because the developing brain needs glucose to process and retain new information. It also matters whether the child feels secure at home. Sources of anxiety — parental unemployment, marital conflict or divorce, violence, abuse and neglect — activate stress hormones that can severely disrupt the way the brain collects and stores information.

As yet, teachers and schools are not expected to feed their students or fix problems related to their home life. Therefore, it does not seem reasonable for them to be charged with the sole responsibility for students' preparedness and motivation for learning.

Governments need to recognise that, although it is easier to hold teachers and schools to account than parents, education does not exist in a vacuum. The four walls of the classroom do not insulate students from the rest of their lives. In fact, the classroom is the space in which their advantage or privation is magnified.

The quality of parenting and home life that young students experience must have its place in the conversation, if we are to be sensible about what the data means, and if we are to enable our young people to succeed.

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