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2-24-2020

## Teachers' priorities for education spending

Sue Thomson

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# Teachers' priorities for education spending

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In my last column I examined secondary school teacher and principal views on resourcing issues that hinder quality teaching, as revealed by the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). What, then, do these teachers see as the spending priorities for Australian education? And are the priorities different in primary schools?

TALIS has been conducted every five years since 2008 and Australia has participated in each cycle. The 2018 cycle, however, marks the first time that Australia has surveyed primary school teachers and principals.

In Australia, 3030 primary school teachers and 223 primary school principals, and 3573 lower secondary (Years 7-10) teachers and 230 secondary principals completed the TALIS questionnaires.

While our **November 2019 report** (<https://research.acer.edu.au/talis/6/>), focused on the responses of lower secondary educators, it did show that primary school principals share similar concerns in relation to school resourcing issues. The main resourcing issue, reported by 27 per cent of primary principals and 28 per cent of lower secondary principals, was a shortage of time for instructional leadership.

As a complement to these educators' reports on resource issues that hinder their schools' capacity to provide quality instruction, TALIS 2018 also asked teachers what they thought might be the priority areas for

intervention and additional spending in education.

## **Classroom teaching**

When asked to rate the importance of a number of priorities if the education budget were to be increased by 5 per cent, teachers similarly highlighted the squeeze on their time. Almost two-thirds of primary teachers (62 per cent) gave high priority to 'reducing teachers' administration load by recruiting more support staff'. This was also the most important priority for Australian lower secondary teachers, with 59 per cent rating it a high priority.

Similarly, 66 per cent of primary teachers and 58 per cent of lower secondary teachers gave high priority to 'reducing class sizes by recruiting more staff'. Further analysis of this item by the OECD showed that, after controlling for classroom composition and teacher characteristics, while teachers who teach larger classes were generally more likely to report reducing class sizes as a spending priority of high importance, this was not the case for Australia overall. It was, however, a significant priority for Australian teachers who worked in schools with a high proportion of students with behavioural problems and also for those in schools with large proportions of refugee students.

Coming back to school resourcing issues, the second most important issue identified by primary and lower secondary principals was 'a shortage of teachers with competence in teaching students with special needs'. Almost 20 per cent of primary and lower secondary principals reported that this issue hindered instruction. Teachers were again in agreement that this is an area of need: 61 per cent of primary teachers and 47 per cent of lower secondary teachers rated 'supporting students with special needs' as of high importance.

## **Teacher salaries**

It is noteworthy that Australian teachers were particularly focused on spending priorities that would improve teaching, and that fewer than half of the Australian primary and lower secondary teachers rated salary increases as a high priority. TALIS shows an inverse relationship between the proportion of teachers who rated 'improving teacher salaries' as a high priority and the salaries of early career teachers in the same country. Perhaps not surprisingly, teachers tend to prioritise improving salaries when their standard of living is lower by international standards.

School context could also be a factor in teachers' tendency to prioritise improving teacher salaries. Australian lower secondary teachers working in schools with higher proportions of socioeconomically disadvantaged students were more likely to prioritise higher salaries than those teaching in schools with a lower proportion of disadvantaged students.

Motivational aspects could also play a role in teachers' tendency to prioritise salary improvement. Analyses conducted by the OECD found that, in general and in Australia, teachers who valued the economic characteristics and working conditions of the job were more likely to prioritise salary increases than teachers who valued altruistic reasons such as providing a contribution to society.

Encouragingly, in Australia and internationally, the vast majority of teachers in Australia and across the OECD indicated that altruistic reasons motivated their career choice. In Australia, 98 per cent of primary teachers and 96 per cent of lower secondary teachers indicated that the fact that 'teaching allowed me to influence the development of children and young people' was of moderate to high importance.

In addition, 93 per cent of lower secondary and 95 per cent of primary teachers indicated that the fact 'teaching allowed me to provide a contribution to society' was of moderate to high importance, and 84 per

cent of primary teachers and 80 per cent of lower secondary likewise gave higher importance to the fact that 'teaching allowed me to benefit the socially disadvantaged'.

This is not to say that the practical considerations – job security, a reliable income, the work schedule and a steady career path – were not important. Between 58 and 83 per cent of Australian primary and lower secondary teachers rated these four practical reasons for becoming a teacher as of moderate or high importance.

Further analysis of Australian primary school teachers' and principals' survey responses will be reported in a second volume national report later this year. This second volume, *Teachers and school leaders as valued professionals* will explore the prestige and standing of the profession, the security, flexibility and reward structures of teaching and school leadership careers, the extent of professional collaboration and collegial relations within schools, and the degree of autonomy and leadership that teachers and school leaders enjoy in their jobs.

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