



Simple as ABC? Not quite

THE POLITICAL GOAL IS FOR A REVOLUTION IN EDUCATION, BUT HOW ARE WE TO IMPLEMENT SUCH A REVOLUTION, ASKS DAVID LOADER.

WE'VE ALL SAID WE WANT A REVOLUTION in education, so what's the best next step? According to the 2007 McKinsey and Company report, *How the best-performing school systems come out on top*, developed countries each year are spending more and more on education per student – Australia almost tripled education spending per student since 1970 – and have made changes in governance, curriculum standards, assessment and testing, and school inspection, yet educational outcomes have improved little. The report cites the English experience, where between 1948 and 1996 there was 'no measurable improvement' in standards of literacy and numeracy.

As the report puts it, it's 'naïve to assume that classroom quality would improve just because we changed the structure.' Practically every school system has reduced class sizes dramatically yet the research evidence is that, except in the early grades, such reduction has not led to better student outcomes. It's not necessarily more teachers we need, but better teachers that deliver the results, with the report citing evidence of the differential impact of 'low-performing' and 'high-performing' teachers on students.

The solution presented in the report is as simple as ABC, the graphic it sports on its cover. The report suggests schools need to go back to first principles and do three things: get the right people to be teachers; develop these people into effective 'instructors'; and ensure that the system is working – and, if necessary, step in when students fail.

It's hard to argue with these recommendations. We need to attract quality people into the profession. In England, apparently,

teaching has become the most popular profession among undergraduates and graduates. We could learn from England here about raising the status of teachers, supporting different ways of entering the profession – currently in England there are 32 different ways of doing this – and offering good starting salaries.

Recruitment is a good first step. Retention is the second. Good people, once recruited, need to be supported. Individual teachers need help to identify their teaching method weaknesses and information on effective strategies to use, and they also need to feel supported and heard, so such strategies as placing teacher coaches in schools, providing better pre-service training of teachers and enabling teachers to learn from each other need to be implemented. But is it as easy as this?

If we implement the report's recommendations we would move to the top of the class, compared to other countries which are similarly committed to the industrial model of schooling. Remember, though, that we're talking about measurement on a limited basis: performance in tests that are mainly about numeracy and literacy. Is that all that we want students to learn in their formative years? No one questions the need for those basic skills; but what about the other 'basic' skills associated with being a positive and contributing member of society, including developing appropriate habits of mind and dispositions to pursue difficult questions with confidence?

The recommendations of the report will help us to become experts at 'instruction,' but is this the only way forward for our

young people? Do we want our students to believe that you can't learn without being taught? A consequence of the present didactic method of instruction is student dependency. Patterns of behaviour, of thinking and of interaction, learned when young, remain with us for life.

Finally, we need to acknowledge that schools have been relatively stable. Sure, they've changed technologically and things like blackboards have given way to interactive whiteboards, but students have been changing much faster and more dramatically. There's a significant discontinuity between yesterday's students and today's students. Today's students live in a digital world and consequently have taken on new ways of thinking, processing information and communicating. They are members of a community of learners who believe that everyone is involved in a collective effort of understanding. The emphasis is upon learning how to learn and sharing this learning. They are connected to their learning 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. They take personal responsibility for finding individual pathways for their learning.

What we need to know is how best to support student learning in more than the basics at a time of dramatic change in the way students interact, think and learn.

In simply asking which school system performs best, we're asking the wrong question. **T**

LINKS: For How the best-performing school systems come out on top, visit www.mckinsey.com/client-service/social-sector/our-practices/philanthropy.asp

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