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Focus on the larger purpose of schooling and improvement may follow

Geoff N. Masters AO

Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), geoff.masters@acer.edu.au

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Chief Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Research

Focus on the larger purpose of schooling and improvement may follow

In his 1946 book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl observed that some things, like success and happiness, are achieved not by pursuing them directly, but as 'side-effects' of a dedication to something larger.

There may be a lesson here for our efforts at school reform.

In recent years there has been a strong focus on improving the outcomes of schooling – particularly students' literacy and numeracy skills. This is appropriate. For too long we measured only inputs to schooling, such as funding levels and student/teacher ratios. However, despite this recent focus, there is little evidence that outcomes have improved.

School systems sometimes pursue improved outcomes directly. They develop standardised tests of student performance; ensure all schools have comprehensive outcome data; publish school results on public websites; hold school leaders and teachers accountable for delivering better outcomes; and link teacher pay to student results. These systems attempt to improve outcomes by focusing on outcomes directly.

Underpinning this approach is a belief that, if desired outcomes are made clear, schools will know or work out how to achieve them. The problem is sometimes perceived as one of effort. With appropriate incentives – either rewards or sanctions – schools will lift their game and outcomes will improve.

On the sporting field and in the swimming pool, in contrast, success depends on continual improvements in techniques and training. When the primary focus is not on outcomes, but on improving practice, the score board and time clock take care of themselves.

Canadian Michael Fullan refers to accountability and incentive schemes as the 'wrong drivers' of school improvement and argues that they are ineffective in practice. Worse, they can result in unintended responses by schools, such as teaching only what is to be assessed and withholding less able students from testing. The alternative is a relentless dedication to identifying and promoting more effective school and classroom practices on the understanding that these that lead to improved outcomes.

A second focus has been on closing achievement gaps – particularly gaps based on students' Indigenous and socioeconomic backgrounds. Again, this is appropriate; average literacy and numeracy gaps can be the equivalent of several years of school. However, despite the considerable effort and resources allocated to this priority over recent decades, there is little evidence that gaps have been reduced.

School systems sometimes pursue the closing of gaps directly. They define equity, disadvantage and student needs along socioeconomic lines; allocate resources to schools at least partially on the basis of students' backgrounds; and design programs and interventions specifically for low socioeconomic and Indigenous students. These systems attempt to close gaps by focusing on gaps directly.

A common assumption is that student groups with different educational outcomes require different educational solutions. The challenge becomes one of establishing 'what works' for Indigenous students or students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Although large amounts of money have been spent on group-specific solutions of these kinds, achievement gaps remain essentially unchanged.

Of equal concern are the unintended consequences of elevating Indigenous and socioeconomic student classifications in the consciousness of schools. By classifying students in these ways and assigning each school a socioeconomic index, an 'explanation' is proffered for the lower performances of some students and some schools. And it is often a small step from explanation to expectation and then to excuse.

More effective might be an indirect approach to closing gaps. If every student's educational needs were identified and addressed with high quality teaching, high expectations and excellent school facilities and infrastructure – regardless of socioeconomic or Indigenous status – gaps might take care of themselves. Certainly it is hard to see how such a focus could be less effective in closing gaps. An 'equitable' school system would then be one in which every child's needs were adequately diagnosed and addressed and every child made excellent learning progress.

Good measures of progress in improving outcomes and closing gaps are essential. However, success may best be achieved not by pursuing it directly, but as a 'side-effect' of an unwavering dedication to the larger educational purpose.