

Sent to The Australian

Overseas Educational Research: Take A Closer Look

Kevin Donnelly (“Educators can also learn from what already works,” January 3) suggests that “overseas experience” can inform Australia’s educational choices. But Mr. Donnelly needs to take a closer look at these experiences.

Contrary to the claims of US Secretary of Education Spellings, the USA’s No Child Left Behind Program (NCLB), despite a cost of billions of dollars, has not succeeded. The increase in reading test scores Mr. Donnelly refers to happened before NCLB went into effect, not after. Also, American fourth graders did not improve between 2001 and 2006 on international PIRLS testing.

The Clackmannanshire project in Scotland did not, as Mr. Donnelly claims, show that intensive phonics was superior to whole language. It only showed that one method of teaching phonics was slightly better than another, and the advantage was only clear for tests in which children read lists of words in isolation.

Mr. Donnelly also considers Project Follow Through to be a success. Please have another look: Direct instruction children did better on “word reading” in grades 5 and 6, but did very poorly (15th and 16th percentile) on tests in which children need to understand what they read. This is identical to the pattern American researcher Elaine Garan found for more recent studies.

It is, of course, a very good idea to consider research results from a wide variety of situations. But we need to study them carefully.

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Educators can also learn from what already works.
(Kevin Donnelly, The Australian, 3-1-08)

As our approach to teaching embraces more traditional methods, the overseas experience can inform our choices.

Looking back over the past 12 months, it is clear that 2007 was a watershed year for education. Much of what has been argued on these pages in terms of increased testing and more rigorous examinations, adopting a back-to-basics approach to curriculum, holding schools accountable and better rewarding teachers, is now mainstream in terms of the debate and is being advocated by ALP state and federal governments.

How can we ensure, though, that initiatives planned for 2008 and beyond will be effective in raising standards, better supporting teachers and schools and ensuring that students receive a well-balanced, academically sound and fulfilling educational experience?

One approach is to learn from what is happening overseas, in addition to our own experience, and to evaluate classroom practice by what the research suggests works.

Ensuring that children are literate and numerate in the early years of primary school is critically important and there is an increasing consensus overseas about the best way to teach such skills.

In Britain, the Rose report, in part based on the success of the Scottish school Clackmannanshire, recommends adopting a synthetic phonics approach to teaching reading, a recommendation the British Government has accepted. In opposition to the prevailing whole-language approach -- whereby, on the assumption that learning to read is as natural as learning to speak, children are taught to look and guess and memorise words by sight -- synthetic phonics "is a sounds-based approach that first teaches children the sounds of letters and how they blend into words, before moving to letter combinations that make up words".

Adopting a more structured approach to literacy and numeracy is also supported by the US research associated with Project Follow Through. The billion-dollar nationwide project evaluated different approaches to teaching and concluded that formal methods of classroom interaction, described as direct instruction, are more effective than the type of teaching associated with Australia's adoption of outcomes-based education.

Summarising what we can learn from Project Follow Through, Australian mathematics researcher Rhonda Farkota noted: "Student-directed learning has consistently more negative outcomes than those achieved in traditional education ... On all measures of basic skills, cognitive development and self-esteem, it (student-centred learning) was shown to be vastly inferior to traditional education."

One of the most respected and influential international tests is the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, held three times since its inception in the mid-'90s, involving 46 countries and testing students at years 4, 8 and 12. On identifying the characteristics of education systems that achieve at the top of the table -- the results place Australia in the second 11 -- it is possible to identify what leads to success.

Stronger performing systems place a greater emphasis on competitive examinations and testing (which are often used to stream students in terms of ability), give teachers clear and succinct road maps detailing what is to be taught, and expect students to master essential knowledge and understanding associated with the key disciplines at each year level.

Research carried out by German academic Ludger Woessmann also concludes that top-performing TIMSS countries have a robust non-government school sector, which leads to increased competition and pressure to do well, schools have autonomy over hiring, firing and rewarding successful teachers, and the influence of teacher unions is restricted.

While critics of George W. Bush's initiative No Child Left Behind -- whereby federal funding is linked to education systems setting clear objectives in terms of raising standards, students are regularly tested, classroom practice is based on what the research suggests works and there are consequences for underperformance -- argue that NCLB has failed, the evidence suggests otherwise.

As noted by US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, setting performance targets, regularly testing students and holding schools accountable have raised standards, as reflected by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

She states: "According to NAEP, more reading progress was made by nine-year-olds from 1999 to 2004 than in the previous 28 years combined. Maths scores have reached record highs across the board."

Given that many overseas education systems have been implementing the types of initiatives on the agenda in Australia for 2008, such as moving to a national curriculum, increased testing and holding schools accountable, it is also vital that we learn from their mistakes.

As argued by the conservative US think tank the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, too much testing, forcing teachers to focus on the basics and imposing a centralised, top-down approach that fails to recognise the unique quality of individual schools can be counterproductive.

Forcing unproven and faddish curriculum change on schools and making them conform to inflexible and intrusive accountability measures can also overwhelm and frustrate teachers, leading to the type of situation evident in Western Australia, where teachers are deserting classrooms and it is impossible to attract newcomers to the profession.

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