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From the Selected Works of Dr Lawrence Ingvarson

August 11, 2016

Improving student outcomes? You have to be in it for the long haul

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/lawrence_ingvarson1/245/

Improving student outcomes? You have to be in it for the long haul

Recent media reports on NAPLAN results read as though education is some kind of state-of-origin football competition where states and territories 'score' better than others.

The fact is the differences between states and territories are actually quite small, while the differences between schools in terms of socioeconomic status (SES) are much larger.

Minimising the differences between more and less advantaged students in more and less advantaged schools in terms of SES and location should be at the centre of national educational policy.

As Australian Council for Educational Research CEO Geoff Masters has observed in a report released in May, one of the main challenges facing us today is that there are growing disparities between Australia's schools and these are increasingly associated with SES. As well, teaching is becoming a less attractive career option for more able school leavers.

While SES and location might explain the differences between more and less advantaged students more than differences in teacher quality, it is still the case that having access to highly effective teachers who remain in the same school for a substantial period makes a real difference for less advantaged students. We must do all we can to ensure that every child has the best teacher possible. For many less advantaged students, good teachers are their best hope.

The question is whether our governments are doing what is necessary to achieve this. We may be spending more on education, but have we been spending it on what matters to ensure every child has the best teacher possible?

When we talk about ensuring teacher quality, we must take a long-term view. Ensuring that schools with less advantaged students are able to recruit and retain highly effective teachers and school leaders is not something achievable with quick-fix policies. And it will take years and even decades to see the impact of improvements in student achievement in schools that have been able to recruit and retain highly effective teachers and school leaders.

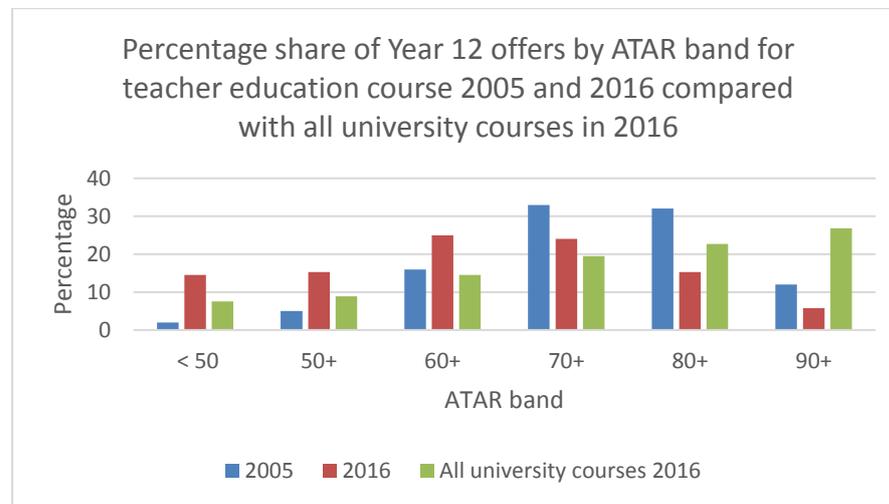
Making teaching an attractive career choice needs to be a key long-term policy.

While Australian students have been remarkably successful on international tests of student achievement until the last 10 years or so, we need to remember that many of their teachers were recruited 20, 30 or even 40 years ago. We also need to keep in mind that the teachers we are recruiting now may teach for the next 30 to 40 years. The recruitment strategies in place now will have a long-term impact on NAPLAN and other results, and on students' life opportunities, decades from now.

Like many of my fellow high school students in the 1950s, I was actively recruited into teaching by state government policies. I was paid a teaching bursary to stay at school and a third of the basic wage during my university course, for which I paid no fees. Salaries for teachers were relatively attractive and compared well with other professions.

Our governments no longer have policies capable of recruiting sufficient numbers of high achievers to meet the demand for new teachers.

The graph below shows that the percentages of students receiving offers of places in undergraduate teacher education programs, in terms of ATAR scores, over the past decade. In 2016, 55 per cent of offers went to students with ATAR scores less than the average ATAR score for Year 12 students.



Source: Commonwealth Department of Education and Training Higher Education Group 2016

No matter how imperfect ATAR scores might be as a predictor of success and retention in a university course, there can be no denying that this situation is a serious threat to the quality of Australia's education system, now and for many years to come.

Research by Peter Dolton and Oscar Marcenaro-Gutierrez [reported in *Economic Policy*](#) in 2011 shows there is a relationship between the academic quality of students attracted to teaching and the salaries of teachers relative to competing professions. Researchers Motoko Akiba and colleagues in a 2012 cross-national study of teacher salary and student achievement shows that countries with higher levels of student achievement offer higher salaries to experienced teachers, relative to GDP per capita. Teacher salaries in Australia relative to GDP per capita have been declining for many years.

The Commonwealth Government's *Attitudes to Teaching as a Career* report found that the main reasons high-achieving students don't choose teaching rest with its status and salaries long term.

Attractive salaries are crucial if we are to attract and retain highly effective teachers.

I recently asked a group of senior administrators from state and territory education departments about the policies they had to reverse this trend in lower ATAR scores and to ensure that teaching could compete more successfully with other professions for our ablest high school and university graduates. The question was met with silence.

Universities vary greatly in terms of the average ATAR scores of entrants to their initial teacher education programs. Potential employers know and they may be reluctant to shortlist applicants graduating from universities whose intake to teacher education programs consists mostly of students with lower than average ATAR scores. Is there a danger that such practices will gradually exacerbate differences in the quality of teaching in more and less advantaged schools?

Australia has been investing more in education, but the strategy needs to address what matters most – strengthening the attractiveness of the teaching profession as a long-term career that duly rewards convincing evidence of highly accomplished teaching.

We will not ensure that every child has the best teacher possible and remove the disparities between student achievement in high- and low-SES schools unless we are willing to pay good teachers what they prove they are worth.

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