

NZ study challenges world on teaching

By CATHERINE WOLFE
catherine.wolfe@star-times.co.nz

A MAJOR new Kiwi study into what makes students succeed casts serious doubt on the importance of homework, small class sizes – and even which school a child attends.

The huge study, based on research into 83 million students from around the world, instead shows that the key to effective teaching is the quality of the feedback students get and their interaction with teachers.

The research has been dubbed “teaching’s Holy Grail” by an influential UK education journal, the *Times Educational Supplement*. National’s new education minister, Anne Tolley, says it will have a “profound influence” on the future of schooling in New Zealand.

Auckland University professor John Hattie, who authored the study, says some of the results fly in the face of National’s popular election promise to reduce class sizes. He believes extra money should instead be spent on boosting



JOHN HATTIE

teacher salaries. “Class size has a pretty small effect... and I wonder why they would spend a penny on it.”

He also believes it is time to revisit the controversial idea of performance-related pay for teachers.

Hattie’s 15-year study, recently published as a book, is thought to be the largest-ever overview of student achievement. It merges results from 50,000 previous studies and a total of 83 million students.

Hattie used these studies to rank 138 aspects of schooling and found that overwhelmingly, student-teacher interaction at schools came out on top.

Number one is “self-reporting” – when the student knows exactly how well they are doing and can explain this, as well as any gaps in their understanding, to their teacher.

Tactics such as letting students take turns to teach the class, and teachers doing post-mortems on their own lessons, are also key.

But many of the things parents probably think make a difference – including class size, school type, homework and a student’s diet and exercise – are nowhere near the top of Hattie’s list.

All of these things could help improve the quality of the interaction in a classroom, but are not nearly as effective as strategies such as giving regular feedback and fostering an atmosphere of trust.

So Hattie advises parents to fret less about which school their child attends, and worry much more about the quality of individual teachers, especially their ability to give useful feedback.

“Ask your kids constantly – what feedback have you got from your teachers? Don’t ask ‘what have you learned?’ Encourage them to look for feedback.”

And teachers, Hattie says, should ask themselves, “how many of the kids in your classroom are prepared to say, in front of the class, ‘we need help, we don’t know what’s going on’ or ‘we need to have this retaught?’”

He says that sort of trust is too rare – which is why he wants to work out a way of paying teachers extra for excellence, rather than expertise.

“It’s a lot easier to throw money at smaller classes, more equipment, more funding, to worry about the curriculum, to worry about the

exams. “It’s a hell of a lot harder to differentiate between good and bad teaching... I think we need to spend a lot more policies on worrying about this.”

Tolley says that although rewarding teachers for excellence is a “tricky issue” it needs to be on the table, particularly as Hattie is close to defining what makes an excellent teacher.

“As difficult as it is, we do need to encourage excellence in teaching... I’m sure that we can come to a satisfactory resolution, if we accept that it is going to make a huge difference to the performance of our education system.”

Tolley wants Hattie to be involved in a cross-sector discussion, to be held this year, about how to solve the teacher “crisis” – where rewarding teacher excellence will also be covered. She says Hattie’s research will have a “profound influence” on how the new government approaches education.

Kate Gainsford, head of the secondary teachers’ union, defended teachers, saying they deserved praise for being in the classroom despite – in many cases – poor resources, pay and support.

She says teachers are already using many of the interactive methods. But she points out that to have time to interact with students, classes need to be kept smaller – and that some now have more than 30 students, despite what schools’ teacher-student ratios claim.

“This is not rocket science. We know that relationships between students and teachers are very important. And we know how those relationships can be supported, and how they can be eroded.”

She emphasises that teachers need to be backed up by resources, policies and training.

Gainsford says it would be “extraordinarily problematic on so many fronts” to work out an excellence-based pay formula. She would like to see the focus on supporting “all kids, in all classes, in all schools”, rather than on a sorting mechanism for teachers.

EDUCATION: THE REPORT CARD

✓ PASS

1. Self-reporting: students understand their own progress
2. Cognitive development: students given work one step ahead
3. Evaluation: test results decide next steps
4. Micro-teaching: video analysis of lessons
5. Acceleration: work set ahead of age level

✗ FAIL

1. Class size
2. Sustained silent reading
3. Frequent testing
4. Homework
5. Teaching test-taking

Visible Learning
by John Hattie
(Routledge 2009)



To News, A2

Save-A

PACKAGE
\$699

Wind
Vanity
Basin, Mir
Oxford T.