

# This is not a blame game!

*By Professor Steven Dinham*

Education systems must overcome a fixation with biological and social determinism to focus on student learning.

Until the mid-1960s, it was generally believed that student achievement was predicted by socio-economic status: that schools, in other words, 'made no difference'.

Many people today, including some practising teachers, still subscribe, consciously or subconsciously, to various forms of biological and social determinism, despite evidence to the contrary.

What students can achieve in their education is not predetermined by heredity, where they live, their socio-economic background or family circumstances. One of the most harmful things we can do to a child is to categorise them as a particular type of person or learner.

To clarify, socio-economic status (SES) and family background do have large measured effects on student achievement.

SES **is** about:

- Foundations and advantage
- Opportunity
- Support
- Role models and encouragement

SES **is not**, however, about:

- Innate ability
- Potential

It also needs to be noted that poor student performance is spread across SES bands and that student achievement tends to vary more within, than between, schools.

Schooling represents an obstacle course. It is not a level playing field or running track and not all students begin from the same starting line. Some students have certain advantages while others have imposed handicaps and encounter severe obstacles. An important principle is that life is not fair, but good teaching and good schools can help overcome SES disadvantage.

To unpack this further, if student achievement was largely predicted by socio-economic status or innate ability, the quality of the education system would indeed 'make no difference'. Research has demonstrated this to be false, however, with schools, and especially individual teachers, accounting for large differences in student performance.

In 2003, Professor John Hattie from the University of Auckland and his colleagues published the findings from a meta-analysis of many thousands of studies into student outcomes and school effectiveness. This important work identified a range of factors that explain or account for the variance in student achievement. It found that students themselves account for about 50% of the variance in achievement: "It is what students bring to the table that predicts achievement more than any other variable" (Hattie, 2003).

The study also found, however, that teachers account for about 30% of the variance in student achievement. Clearly, this is a factor that the education system can influence. It also needs to be noted that prior learning and achievement is a major component of the 50% of variance each student 'brings' with him or her to the classroom.

This, and much other research, shows that all students can benefit from quality education; and that the best way to improve the quality of education is to improve the effectiveness of teachers.

Like students, teachers have long been falsely categorised. Over many decades, films, books and television have portrayed the heroic, individual 'born' teacher battling against the odds to rein in unruly, uncaring students and fire within them a love of learning, often coming up against equally uncaring fellow teachers and inept principals in the process. In the same schools where these teachers work their magic, students of other teachers are stultified and demoralised. This ongoing media fascination reinforces an educational research tradition focusing on the attributes or traits of individual teachers (Toole & Louis, 2002).

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In her book *Powerful Teacher Education*, Linda Darling-Hammond describes the belief that "good teachers are born and not made" as one of education's "most damaging myths", one that has gained the standing of a "superstition", with harmful consequences for teacher education and schooling (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. ix).

Obviously, if teachers are born and not made, there is no need for or point to teachers' professional learning. Research evidence, however, points conclusively to the fact that teaching is not a matter of innate qualities, but of learning and growth (Scott, C & Dinham, 2008).

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It takes time, however, for teachers to develop from novice, to competent, and to expert, and the expectation that first-year teachers will immediately be capable and effective is unrealistic.

However, the progression from novice to expert is neither automatic nor merely the result of accumulated experience. Being an expert is not a matter of being a 'born teacher', nor of personality, intelligence, memory or some form of general ability. While attaining expert teacher status can take a substantial amount of time, this is more a matter of 'rich' experience, working and talking with colleagues and supervisors, professional learning, trial and error and experimentation, role-modelling, feedback and reflection.

We know that teacher expertise varies considerably. There is a saying that while some teachers have 25 years of experience, other teachers have the same year of experience 25 times over. In other words, not all teachers will reach expert status and none will do so automatically. However, all teachers are capable of learning to be more effective, including highly experienced and even 'stale' teachers.

David Berliner, an authority in the field of the development of teaching expertise has suggested that moving from novice status to achieving competence as a teacher takes around two to three years. The development of a high level of skill, however, takes five to seven years and a great deal of work (Berliner, 2004, p. 63). The professional standards frameworks being developed and introduced across Australia reflect this reality.

While there is little doubt about the importance of the individual teacher, based on these findings and the literature in general, principals and other leaders can influence student achievement, but the challenge for any educational leader is to make things happen within individual classrooms. School leaders can play major roles in creating the conditions in which teachers can teach effectively and students can learn, with the influence of leadership on student achievement perhaps having been underestimated (Dinham, 2008).

It is because of findings like these that there has been so much attention paid to improving teacher education, the quality of teachers (Dinham, Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, 2008) and the quality of teaching in recent times (Dinham, 2006). However, it must be recognised that there is still not a level playing field either in education or in life, and I can't see that changing much.

Student learning and achievement must be the central focus of every school, educational system, department of education and education faculty; but socio-economic status and family background will still exert powerful

influences, not on innate student ability or capacity, but on expectations, support, opportunities and life choices.

Above all, education remains our best chance for overcoming disadvantage and for opening the doors of opportunity. The biggest challenge and equity issue in Australian education today is having a quality teacher in every classroom. It is pleasing to see this being increasingly recognised and addressed through various national and systemic initiatives.

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