

Questions for Geoff Masters

1. Educational research, and by extension, ACER, is sometimes perceived as irrelevant to *chalkface teaching*. What are your thoughts on the relationship between educational research and classroom practice and how it can be strengthened?

The key to improving the quality of classroom teaching is the implementation of evidence-based pedagogical practices – that is, teaching strategies that have been demonstrated by research and through experience to be effective in improving student engagement and learning. Too much of what happens in classrooms has been shaped by fads and fashions and people’s beliefs about what ‘should’ work rather than by what is known to work in practice. Professions are defined largely by a shared knowledge base. Educational research is playing an essential role in building that knowledge base.

2. There has been a range of research showing that of school-based factors, teachers hold the greatest influence on students’ learning outcomes. Further, the training prospective teachers are required to undergo in Finland, their subsequent professional autonomy, and the continual Finnish reign in the upper echelons of international testing have all been well-publicised. With these facts in mind, as well as the OECD’s recent decrying of falling educational standards in Australia, what are your thoughts on what is standing in the way of Australian education and the heights of PISA (and TIMSS) testing results?

Finland, and other high-performing countries such as Singapore, have been remarkably successful in raising the status of teaching as a career. A number of high-performing countries draw their teaching workforce from the top 30% of school leavers; a few countries draw their teachers from the top 10% of school leavers. In other words, teaching is a highly respected and sought after career and these countries have succeeded in making teaching attractive to their brightest and best schools leavers. In my opinion, this is a key to raising the quality of classroom teaching in a country. In Australia, we are moving in the opposite direction -- teaching is becoming increasingly less attractive to our most able students.

- a. What do you see as a solution moving forward?

A starting point is to recognise that current trends can be arrested and turned around. Other countries have succeeded, through a set of deliberate policy decisions, to make teaching a more attractive and more highly regarded career. It requires government action. Adequate pay is part of the answer, but it is also clear that high-performing countries control the numbers of people being trained in teacher education courses to the numbers required. Making teaching competitive is part of the strategy these countries use to make it more attractive. The academic

rigour of initial teacher education programs also is a factor in how teaching is perceived.

3. John Hattie last year commented that teachers should leave the research to the researchers. As CEO and a Board Member with ACER, what are your thoughts on that statement and the relationship that teachers should have with formal research?

There are certain kinds of research that require high levels of training in research methods. We should not expect every teacher to also be a highly trained educational researcher. But we should expect teachers to be informed users of research evidence. This is a basic expectation of members of every profession. We also should expect teachers to experiment and learn as part of their day-to-day teaching. This often will mean being clear about the student outcomes they are seeking to improve; experimenting with alternative teaching strategies; evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies in producing the desired outcomes; and reflecting and learning from their efforts.

4. What are your thoughts on why the Basic Skills tests/NAPLAN tests changed from being a low-priority test that gave some general comparative information to teachers and parents; to being such an incredibly high-stakes and divisive topic?

International experience tells us that behaviours in schools change when the stakes attached to tests are increased. In many cases, high-stakes testing is part of a deliberate strategy to improve performances through the use of incentives. These incentives include bonuses for teachers tied to test results, financial rewards for school improvement, the threat of intervention and sanctions for poor performance, and the risk of losing students to higher performing schools. In Australia, NAPLAN results have been made public so that parents can compare performances when selecting schools. In my opinion, this decision explains the current level of controversy – a level that did not exist in relation to the earlier state-based tests that were primarily focused on providing information to teachers and parents about individual students' basic literacy and numeracy skills.

- a. What are your thoughts on the role that standardised testing should play in education?

Good quality tests are as essential in education as they are in other areas of professional practice. They provide vital information for establishing starting points for action, diagnosing areas requiring attention, monitoring improvements over time, and evaluating the effectiveness and impact of programs and interventions. High quality tests, such as the widely used Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT), are an essential component of the toolkit of professional teachers.

5. What advice would you give to new teachers as they enter classrooms faced with pressures for high NAPLAN results?

There are few things as important in schools as providing all students with sound foundations in literacy and numeracy. The goal should be to improve students' literacy and numeracy levels, not to maximise NAPLAN scores. The problem is that NAPLAN scores can be increased in ways that do not lead to better literacy and numeracy levels.