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Christians and educational reform

In this month's *TCF News*, we look at the influence of international testing results on schools and question whether the type of education system that produces the top results is the way for Australia to go. Increasingly, government decisions are being driven by these comparative country results and schools are being pressured to perform better in the areas of literacy and numeracy. In particular, as evidenced by recent NAPLAN results showing plateauing in performance, the Australian government is questioning the effectiveness of additional funding. What is our view as Christians about these matters?

Placing these results in perspective, *TCF News* has published some thoughts from the recent TCF Getaway where members looked at what might be expected from a Christian teacher in the classroom and in the school if they focussed their behaviours, attitudes and values on Mathew 5:13-16 and Mark 8:34-38. The result is a very useful list for reflection.

John Gore

The leaning tower of PISA

Sun Young is in Year 9 in middle school in Seoul, South Korea. He wakes at 6am and washes and has breakfast before doing his homework due that day. Before school starts, he has an additional lesson for self-study, and then he sits through seven lessons depressed by knowing that already in Year 9 he has little chance of going to a prestigious high school. His parents expect better from him and he is under constant pressure to improve his performance.

On odd numbered Saturdays he has extra-curricular activities, but these have been modified to additional main subject lessons because of parent pressure for students to improve. Also, his school is a single sex school, again by parent choice based on the belief that he will study better in a single sex environment.

After school, Sun Young attends tutoring in Korean, Mathematics and English. He returns home around 8pm to eat and start his homework. He knows that in High School (Years 10-12) he will extend this after school study to 10pm with some of his fellow students studying even longer and getting into a pattern of just five hours sleep.

Sun Young has not given up but he and his friends know that they do not have the marks to get to the high schools their parents want. Hence, the classroom can often be a battle field for teachers with depressed students where their under achievement contributes to poor behaviours, disrupting others and bring punishments.

South Korea is rank third on the OECD education index which uses the *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA) and *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMSS).

In Australia, the OECD ranking has been falling and Australia is now a middle country ranked 14th rather than in the top ten as was the case previously. At the top of the rankings are Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. The PISA test held every three years shows Australia falling behind since 2000 where it was ranked 6th Mathematics, 8th Science and 4th for reading. Whereas South Korea's performance, on a par with Australia in 2000, has gradually improved.

The fundamental question is whether or not Australia wants to get improved results by adopting the education system and teaching style, of the Asian countries like South Korea who sit at the top of these tables. Is PISA leaning on Australian educators, politicians and schools to change and if so in what directions?

Concerns about the tests

As well as concerns about how the school system might operate to achieve improved results there are some important points to be considered about the tests themselves:-

- Results for mathematics, reading and science provide a narrow and limited view of students' studies and performances.
- Little account is taken of important life skills including problem solving, social interaction, civic responsibilities, abilities to work in groups and interpersonal skills.
- The tests put huge pressure on politicians to justify the education in their schools.
- The pedagogical focus to attain top results is repetitive rote learning which does not assist students to learn how to learn but favours retentive minds discriminating against other forms of learning.
- International testing encourages expansions in standardised testing within countries.

The counter arguments are focussed on member countries having a valid education standard to gauge their progress and to identify further improvements for the good of all citizens through economic growth and improved overall educational standards.

Curriculum and pedagogy

One of the tensions underlying these concerns is the desire of the community and government to give a curriculum guarantee about what students learn. For years, the curriculum in Australia was state-based and only recently has there finally been a national curriculum, although not yet fully implemented. Even that curriculum is not complete, but a series of

subjects trying to address the concerns about the crowded curriculum and to provide a common core (for testing) across all states.

A concern is that what is core (minimum) can even be further reduced as schools attempt to show through NAPLAN that they are improving students' performance. Many a time a school has bragged that it is a literacy and numeracy school to the detriment of the rest of the curriculum.

This form of testing is narrow and high stakes and can lead to further narrowing of the curriculum as teachers focus on results. Worse than this narrowing, teachers can be attracted to using rote learning and drill rather than constructivist approaches that develop understanding, skills and abilities that can assist students to learn throughout their lives. Some schools still have special classes for NAPLAN test to ensure that students get practice in the type of test.

Is there an expectation that Australia will head down the pathway of Asian countries and adapt further their pedagogy to rote learning? Will senior students need to do even more additional studies and private tutoring that eventually steals their adolescence? This is a fundamental question for politicians, educationalists and schools and the subject of an article in the SMH 9 July 2015 *School system is under pressure*.

Improved pedagogy, not cloning our pedagogy to Asia education systems, must be part of Australia's answer to improved performance. In this regard, the recent changes to the NSW HSC are welcomed as fostering improved pedagogy and making rote learning for examinations and copying for assessment tasks more difficult.

Other factors

Not all successful school systems are driven by tests. Test performance is also influenced by other factors, two of which are resources and class size. Then there is also the issue of tests and tertiary entrance.

It is reported (SMH *OECD education rankings show Australia slipping, Asian countries in the lead* 1 June 2015) that if Australia was to improve its performance in PISA by 25 points its GDP would expand by 7.2%. Education pays dividends so the issues around Gonski should be resolved so that schools benefit from the full Gonski and not the various modified versions offered by both major parties. Resources will make a difference as indicated in Finland where resources and the second factor class size appear with pedagogy to affect results. However, governments expect immediate returns and the plateauing of NAPLAN results in Australia has led the Australian Minister for Education to question whether additional funding has resulted in any significant gains. Political impatience will be a factor in gaining the additional resources Australian schools need through Gonski. Increased resources and teacher training will be effective, but the gains will be slow to be realised through tests that cover such a large cohort in a narrow range of variables.

Class size is a factor, but not by a movement from 30 students to 28 or to 24 or even 20. Research shows that class sizes under 20 can have a significant effect of student learning. Schools receiving Gonksi funding would do well to put these resources into teacher professional learning, addition teachers and smaller class sizes.

An additional and related matter is how tests are used to determine university entrance. The current model of the HSC provides a broad-based set of tests which are standards-referenced where marks are moderated according to the quality of the candidature in each course. An iterative scaling method is then used to determine the ATAR for students seeking entry to university. This is a better and fairer way of determining rank than a narrow set of standardised tests. If the HSC is not to perform this function then universities would develop their own tests which are unlikely to be comprehensive and more likely to reflect the narrowness of the international and national testing program.

Christian perspective

As Christians, we believe that the whole curriculum can reveal God and his work in the world. It is difficult to accept narrowing that curriculum to a predominantly reading and numeracy focus which is used to judge students, teachers, schools, states and even countries. While accepting the need for accountability, Christian teachers are focussed on the whole student and any distortion to a high stakes narrow assessment is unhelpful. As salt and light (see following report from 2016 Getaway) Christians have a far more holistic and student-centred view of education. Their challenge is to conform to the state requirements including testing, and to pursue their calling as Christians in the spheres of education.

In summary, if Australia's PISA rankings are to improve it would be better to have some combination of pedagogy, smaller classes and increased resources than to head down the Asian countries' path of greater competition and out-dated pedagogy resulting in stolen adolescence and student alienation. It is in Australia's best interests to resist the leaning of the tower of PISA for such changes to occur.

John Gore

The Christian teacher

At the 2016 TCF Getaway, participants were given the task of describing the behaviours, values and attitudes they would expect from Christian teachers in the classroom by examining Matthew 5:13-16 and in the wider school by examining Mark 8:34-38 . A compilation of their views follows which is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive but a resource for reflection. Editor

The Classroom

Matthew 5:13-16 NIV

[13] *“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled*

underfoot. [14] “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. [15] Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. [16] In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Salt is distinctive as a preservative. Christians preserving a knowledge of God in our society - his creativity, holiness and character. They seek to preserve what is good and right and consistent with the nature of God. Being holy rather than judging or condemning others or insisting others conform to them.

Salty Christians attempt to be honest, display integrity, are not self-serving, care for others and hate corruption. They want to protect the vulnerable and don't seek revenge.

They are good listeners to children but also maintain discipline and control for effective learning. They have encouraging relationships with students, especially the trouble makers ensuring that they are positive and able to help those who have trouble coping with the school environment.

Salt stops decay, Christians can help to preserve what is good in the classroom, school and society.

There is darkness in the world. Christians are to be the light of the world to glorify God - to make him and his character known. As well as upholding high moral standards, being light will mean explicitness about Christian commitment. Christians can use non-denominational prayers and with a child's permission pray with them. Express personal views when asked but don't allow them to dominate a discussion.

Their relationships with students are to show respect in their use of language and of students' cultural background and to provide an inclusive, emotional safe environment. Light cannot be hidden and a teacher's behaviour is to be beyond reproach. Be humble and fair, don't show favouritism especially to other Christian students. Show love equally to establish justice.

The school

Mark 8:34-38 NIV

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life^[b] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.”

Denying yourself is a daily struggle against self. It involves self-sacrifice for the sake of others. It could involve:- staying in the classroom and not seeking promotion, resisting the temptation to be critical or judgemental, avoiding the abuse of power, not taking revenge when the opportunity arises, not joining in when an activity is inconsistent with values.

Taking up my cross and following Jesus is an active choice and represents daily death to self and to one's past. It is a fresh start on a new journey. For Christian teachers it can mean daily renewal of faith and commitment reflecting on what has been and striving to be more like Jesus. Following Jesus is to act in love and in the school it can be about being there for others - both students and teachers. It is about working hard, being on time for class and participating in extra-curricular activities; about being involved in issues and resolving conflict; about being informed and up to date; avoiding gossip and building others up, not putting them down; and about being straight forward not manipulative. But it is also about being involved in Christian groups within the school or facilitating SRE and seeking other Christian teachers to pray with.

Christians have not been called into an easy life but one of sacrifice and they need to be ready for the ultimate sacrifice where life is lost. In such a loss it is better to have known Jesus then it is to follow the world and its emphasis on wealth, success and achievement.

Being ashamed about Jesus is to not stand up for your faith when questioned or challenged. It can also be about missed opportunities and a reluctance to make the most of situations within the school. There is a need to be open about one's beliefs and to put them forward in discussions.



Some participants on the *Getaway* afternoon walk.

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