



Raise the standard, don't lower academic bar

Motivation is more influential than a student's socioeconomic background

KEVIN DONNELLY



WHAT determines educational success? Research by the British-based Institute of Psychiatry at King's College London concludes that 58 per cent of the variation in General Certificate of Secondary Education scores (Britain's GCSE is the equivalent of our Higher School Certificate) is explained by students' genetic make-up.

While there's no doubt that home and school environment play an important role, a student's innate cognitive ability is highly influential when explaining why some students outperform others.

University of Melbourne researcher Gary Marks, in *Education, Social Background and Cognitive Ability*, also stresses the importance of ability when he writes: "Cognitive ability has a considerably stronger influence than socioeconomic background on educational outcomes in many different contexts."

Such research flies in the face of one of the tenets of Australia's progressive and cultural-left education establishment, where many argue that success or failure are determined by socioeconomic background associated with being working class, from a non-English-speaking background or indigenous.

The education establishment argues that success or failure has nothing to do with ability, motivation or character and say all that is needed to overcome disadvantage is to invest additional billions, as recommended by the Gonski

report on school funding.

Ignored is the fact the additional billions spent on education, here and overseas, across many years have done nothing to raise standards or strengthen school performance.

As a McKinsey & Company 2010 report, *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*, says: "Most OECD countries doubled and even tripled their spending on education in real terms between 1970 and 1994. Unfortunately, despite this increase . . . student outcomes in a large number of sys-

tems either stagnated or regressed."

American academic and author of *The Bell Curve* Charles Murray describes the deficit view as "educational romanticism", the belief among cultural-left educators that all children are capable of achieving the same results and that if extra millions are invested standards will rise.

The egalitarian belief is that all students deserve the same level of success because, so the argument goes, a situation where there are high and low performers is symptomatic of an inequitable and socially unjust education system.

Competitive, high-risk Year 12 examinations; a commitment to meritocracy and rewarding excellence; and an assessment system where D means fail are all derided as reinforcing capitalist hierarchies and an elitist view of education.

William Spady, the US academ-

ic responsible for Australia's adoption of outcomes-based education, justifies this progressive view by arguing that "all students potentially are eligible to reach and receive full credit for achieving any performance standards in the system. There are no quotas on who can be successful or on what standards can be pursued."

Spady goes on to condemn more traditional forms of assessment, such as Year 12 examinations, because such systems are primarily "selecting and sorting mechanisms" employed to get "smart kids in to university".

Arguments against "normative" assessment, where students are ranked on the basis of a predetermined distribution, have prevailed for many years.

The Australian Education Union's 1993 curriculum policy argues against year-level standards of achievement and competitive, external examinations used to rank students and to determine university entry.

A 2004 paper by the Australian Council of Deans of Education, *New Teaching, New Learning*, argues against competitive, summative assessment in favour of school-based assessment involving projects, performances and group and portfolio methods of assessing students.

The deans describe formal, externally set and marked examinations as "old learning" and are critical because the process, supposedly, is limited to "learning by

rote" and students knowing "correct things in their heads" and being able to demonstrate "clearly right and wrong answers".

One needs only to read some of the submissions to the Queensland government's review of years 11 and 12 assessment, such as those made by Peter Ridd from James Cook University and long-time

teacher Patrick Whalen, to see how misguided and damaging the view of assessment championed by the deans of education has been.

The belief embraced by Australia's education establishment and by champions of the Gonski report is that socioeconomic background determines whether students suc-

ceed or underperform. Intelligence and innate ability are ignored, and the only reason students in Catholic and independent schools outperform disadvantaged state school students is, they say, because they come from wealthy, privileged backgrounds.

Marks, in his book noted above, criticises this view of education as

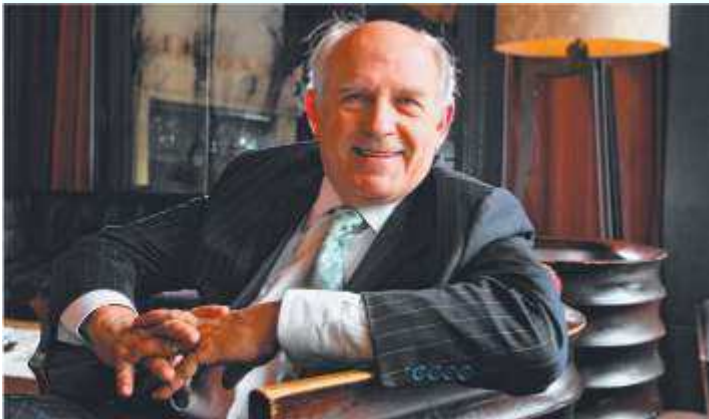
contributing to a "pervasive misunderstanding that cognitive ability is irrelevant to education and subsequent socioeconomic inequalities".

While unpalatable to the cultural Left, and as argued by Murray in *Real Education*, academic achievement is closely tied to academic ability and, unfortunately,

academic ability as measured by IQ tests is not evenly distributed across the population.

Based on the concept of a bell curve, there will always be those students at the upper end of the curve who are academically successful, in the same way that there will always be students who fail to perform as well.

Regardless of the additional millions spent and the raft of recent educational innovations such as the US's No Child Left Behind program, Murray also argues that "the changes we can expect in academic achievement in the lower half of the ability distribution are marginal, no matter what edu-



SAM MOOY

US academic Charles Murray eschews 'educational romanticism'

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cational reforms are introduced". As evidence, he points to the trend results for the US National Assessment of Educational Progress that across 40 years show minimal improvement in areas such as basic literacy and numeracy.

To argue that cognitive ability is a key factor in determining how well students perform at school is not to suggest that inheritance is destiny, or that nothing can be done to lift standards and strengthen the performance of many under-achieving students.

What the British Secretary of State for Schools, Michael Gove, describes as the "soft bigotry of low expectations" has held sway for far too long among many educators who characterise working-class, migrant and indigenous students as always disadvantaged and at-risk. Instead of schools in disadvantaged areas assuming that academic rigour and imposing high standards are only for schools in affluent, middle-class suburbs, they need to work on the assumption,

as argued in the OECD's paper PISA In Focus No 5, that "disadvantaged students can and do defy the odds".

The OECD paper argues that a significant factor explaining the

success of students in Asian countries such as South Korea and Hong Kong in international tests is that schools and teachers promote resilience in disadvantaged students. Many Western countries, on the other hand, accept low expectations.

Another OECD paper, PISA In Focus No 34, reinforces the need for high expectations when it concludes that one of the characteristics of stronger-performing education systems is "a belief in the potential of all their students", regardless of background.

The example of Australia's Catholic schools, where an analysis of mathematics and science results in the National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy of 2009 and last year shows that such schools are very effective in reducing the gap between high and low-performing groups of students, proves it can be done.

In a post on The Conversation website, Philip Roberts from the University of Canberra criticises the mainstream curriculum for disempowering disadvantaged students and implies that there should be an alternative, a "curriculum for the least advantaged".

Roberts, like many educators who have succumbed to the soci-

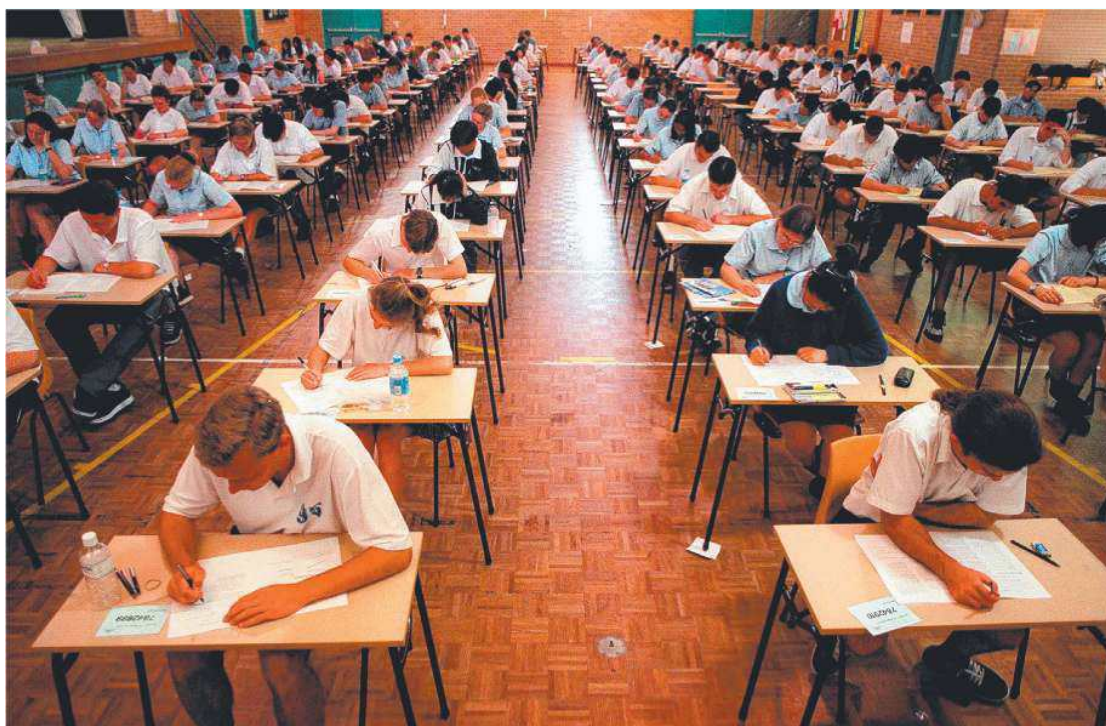
ology of education movement, argues "the formal curriculum has been shown to be biased towards the interests of the most advantaged groups in society. In this way curriculum can be seen to serve their interests and not the interests of the least well-off in society".

Such a view — one that has dominated educational discourse since the late 1960s — denies disadvantaged students what the Victorian Blackburn report describes as the "best validated knowledge and artistic achievements" that should form the basis of any worthwhile curriculum.

Saying that disadvantaged students should not learn standard English, be familiar with the literary canon or what Roberts describes as "the Western scientific world view" condemns them to a narrow and superficial education.

An impoverished view of education denies such students the social and cultural capital so essential if they are to be educated citizens able to shape their lives and contribute to society.

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