



RESEARCH REPORT SNAPSHOT

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Getting the most out of Gonski 2.0: The evidence base for school investments

Blaise Joseph

The meaning of 'evidence-based' education policy

Australia's literacy and numeracy standards have continued to decline in recent years, despite the significant increase in spending on schools over that time. This alarming mismatch between expenditure and outcomes—demonstrated by our sliding literacy and numeracy rankings on international tests—warns that we need to think urgently about how education funding is spent. The focus of education policy must shift from simply 'more money' as a solution to instead using funding to invest in cost-effective, evidence-based policies and practices. This is the rationale behind the government's 'Gonski 2.0' review.

The quality of research underpinning particular policies and practices must be considered. Not all evidence is equally reliable; and some school investments are objectively better than others. We should prioritise investments supported by rigorous research; those based on high quality, large random sample quantitative analyses—as opposed to less rigorous evidence such as case studies and broad policies for which the effects cannot be isolated.

If schools do not invest in evidence-based policies and practices, the additional 'Gonski 2.0' funding is unlikely to improve student outcomes.

One example of the need for a greater focus on evidence-based policy is the area of teacher professional learning. Australian teachers are required to periodically attend professional development activities, and do so relatively often compared to other countries, but the teaching practices they learn are not necessarily evidence-based. States and territories, with the exceptions of New South Wales and the ACT, do not have accreditation standards for professional development providers. As a result, professional development is expensive but the quality of content is inconsistent.

Three evidence-based school investments

There are three evidence-based investments schools should consider, which have the potential to significantly and cost-effectively boost literacy and numeracy results.

1. Early literacy and numeracy

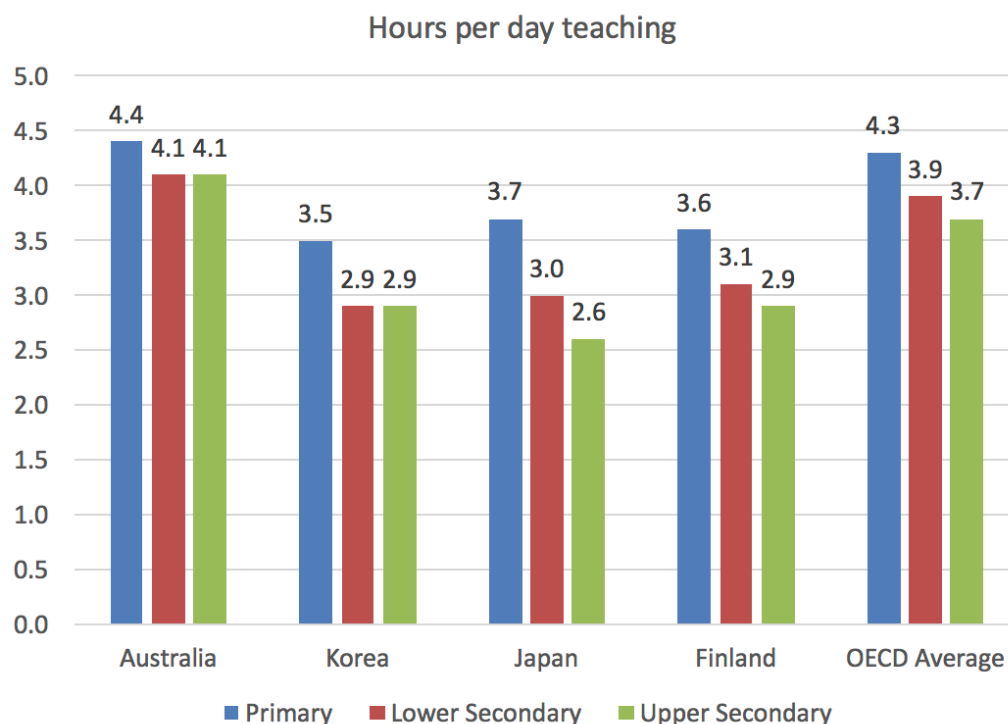
Intervention to help students who are underachieving in literacy and numeracy is more effective in early primary years than in later schooling. Schools should prioritise investing in early specialist support staff and evidence-based programs to help underachieving students.

Phonics are an essential part of the required measures to effectively teach reading. Disadvantaged students, such as students with disabilities and students from non-English speaking backgrounds, also benefit greatly from phonics instruction. This is the overwhelming conclusion based on the available evidence spanning decades.

However, teachers' education degrees do not equip them with the language knowledge necessary to effectively teach reading; and phonics instruction is not consistently taught well in Australian schools. Therefore, primary school teachers could be helped by attending professional development specifically to improve teaching of reading and phonics instruction. This investment could be paid for—in full or in part—by prioritising phonics over other, less important, professional learning.

A greater focus on early literacy and numeracy intervention and teaching would also complement the federal government's proposed Year 1 check.

Figure 1: Teacher class time in Australia with international comparisons



2. Give teachers fewer classes and more time outside the classroom

Australian teachers spend more time each day teaching in class relative to the OECD and the top-performing countries.

This means, all else being equal, Australian teachers have less time to plan, refine, and review their lessons. These sorts of activities outside the classroom have significant positive effects on teaching quality and student outcomes, according to recent studies on the subject.

However, Australian surveys show that teachers—and new teachers in particular—do not have sufficient time to effectively plan lessons and collaborate with other teachers.

It would be beneficial to give teachers fewer daily classes so they can have more time outside the classroom to improve their teaching. The extra cost of this approach would be minimal if it was offset by other savings, such as by increasing class sizes or making teaching hours more proportional to teacher experience.

3. Classroom management training

Australia has high levels of classroom misbehaviour compared to the OECD and the high-performing countries.

Classroom misbehaviour has significant negative effects on student achievement and can be ameliorated by effective classroom management techniques. But recent research shows Australian teacher education degrees do not provide evidence-based classroom management practices to adequately prepare teachers to deal with misbehaviour.

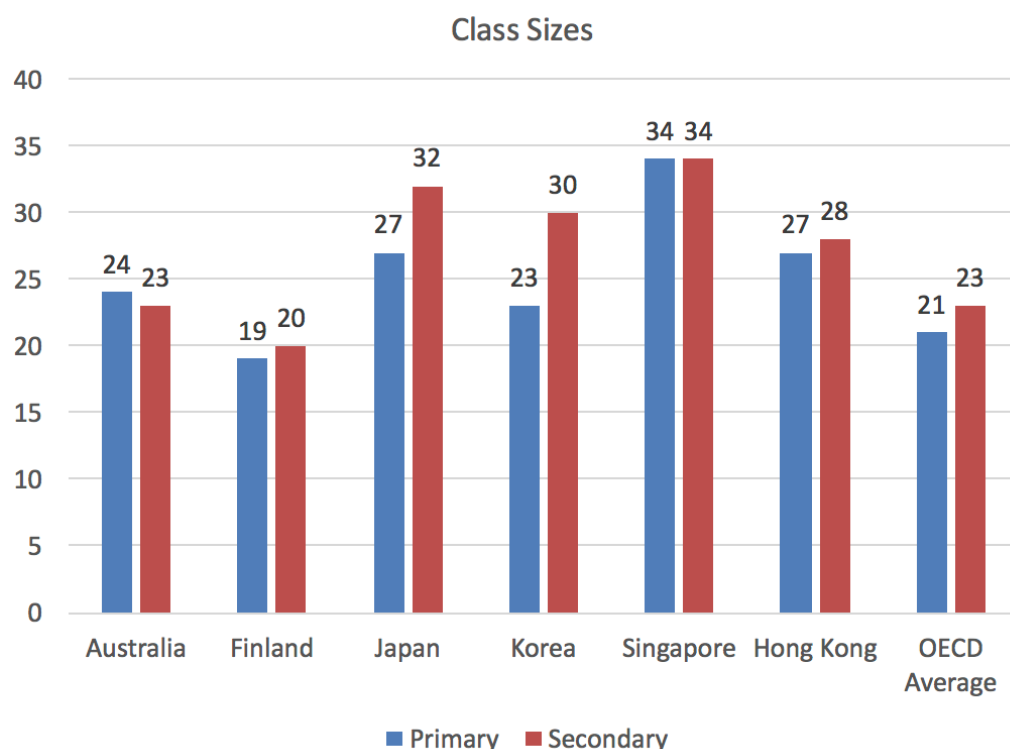
Teachers could benefit from attending professional development specifically to learn and foster evidence-based classroom management techniques, which would not add substantial further costs if it was implemented instead of less important teacher development.

Classroom misbehavior is especially prevalent among students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in Australia, so this initiative could help disadvantaged students in particular.

Table 1: Classroom misbehaviour in Australia and international comparisons

Classroom Misbehaviour (% of students who report the following issues)					
	<i>Students don't listen to what the teacher says</i>	<i>There is noise and disorder</i>	<i>The teacher waits a long time for students to quiet down</i>	<i>Students cannot work well</i>	<i>Students don't start working for a long time after the lesson begins</i>
Australia	32	33	29	22	26
Hong Kong	40	43	34	24	28
Singapore	15	14	13	13	14
Finland	9	11	8	13	9
OECD average	24	24	19	14	17

Figure 2: Class sizes in Australia with international comparisons



Two common school investments without sufficient evidence

There are two common school investments that are not supported by sufficient evidence to justify significantly more spending.

1. Smaller class sizes

Australian class sizes are not especially high relative to the OECD or the top-performing countries.

Class size reduction appears to have limited positive—and also inconsistent—effects on student achievement. Many recent studies have shown little or no positive effects of having smaller classes. Furthermore, it appears investments to reduce class sizes are not cost-effective. Smaller classes also have the potential to dilute teacher quality.

Much more evidence would be required to justify significant investments to further reduce class sizes in Australia.

2. Technology

Australian schools already use technology significantly more than most of the OECD and high-achieving countries.

The positive effects of education technology are inconsistent, depending on a range of factors. There is conflicting evidence in the recent research on the topic, but overall there is no clear link between student achievement and the level of investment in classroom technology.

Investments in technology also have the potential to both be expensive and quickly become obsolete. One example of this was the Rudd and Gillard governments' 'Digital Education Revolution' program, which was significantly more expensive than originally estimated, had many implementation issues, and was not linked at all to improved literacy and numeracy for students.

Given classroom technology is already used much more in Australian schools relative to other countries, there is insufficient evidence to suggest investing more in classroom technology would improve student achievement.

Table 2: Students use of computers at school in Australia with international comparisons

	% of students using computers at school	Computers for educational purposes per student in the school
Australia	93.7	1.53
Singapore	69.9	0.67
Hong Kong	83.8	0.73
Korea	41.9	0.40
Japan	59.2	0.56
Finland	89.0	0.46
OECD average	71.8	0.68

Author

Blaise Joseph is an education policy analyst and a former teacher. He specialises in policy relating to education funding in Australia and has recently been working with Research Fellow Jennifer Buckingham on school funding models.