

LAUNCH OF *WHY NOT THE BEST SCHOOLS?*

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Why Not the Best Schools by Brian Caldwell and Jessica Harris is an important book because it asks a daring question: why can't every community have schools that are as good as the best schools in the world?

To some people, reared on the notion that to get a really good education for your children, you must scrimp and save and impoverish yourself and mortgage your home and find a decent private school, the question might seem abstract.

But when we look at some of the inspiring examples of schools which are having outstanding success while working in disadvantaged settings today, the question seems much more compelling, and real.

Why can't every community have schools that are as good as the best schools in the world?

We might take an example from our own community like Debney Park Secondary College in Flemington, which came to attention in 2005-6.

The school's catchment area contains large numbers of recently arrived Sudanese and Somali refugees, many of whom had never held a pen or handled a book. Yet a quarter of its VCE students have consistently gained ENTER scores above 80.

Two years ago, more than 10 per cent of Debney Park Secondary College students earned over 90. A survey of students one year after leaving school found 96 per cent had gone on to tertiary education or training.

None were unemployed. That's one inspiring example, close to home, of what even a disadvantaged school can achieve.

Another example, from a completely different culture, is Katha School in India, whose achievements are reported in this book. Katha School operates in a poverty-stricken community in Delhi.

Fewer than two per cent of its students drop out, and many secure employment in India's information industry, in large part because the school has built excellent relationships with computer-based industries, and consciously pursued a specialization in IT.

This story shows us that excellence in teaching, while absolutely crucial, is not the only necessary ingredient for successfully transforming a school.

The other ingredients include building successful external partnerships with the broader community, engaging school families and strengthening financial support for the school.

Brian and Jessica provide a useful terminology to describe all this: they talk of the social, spiritual and financial “capital” of a school.

But more important than all of these, they argue, is “intellectual capital” – the quality of the teachers in the school.

In the end, the message is simple: if we want to transform schools to be the best in the world, we need the very highest standard of teaching.

We need Masters level teaching, at least. The sort of teaching you might achieve (I just add in passing) through a Masters in Teaching at the University of Melbourne!

Now you may have noticed that Finland has been getting rave reviews in the media lately. “Finland is the shining light,” said a headline in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Tuesday.

Finland boasts many fine things, including the Nokia phone company, and another is the Finnish school system. Finland’s schools are ranked as the best in the world according to the OECD’s PISA study, and other experts agree.

A key to the success of the Finnish system, this book shows, is the high quality of teaching demanded by every school. In fact, it’s mandated in government policy.

Every teacher in Finland now must acquire a Masters degree before they will be allowed to teach.

A commentator reported widely in Australia this week, Peter Mortimore, made another point about Finland, namely that the Finns do not impose national testing on their students. Nor do they allow public comparisons of schools based on results.

Brian and Jessica make that point too, but their analysis is broader. Apart from the fact that Finland’s teachers are required to have Masters level qualifications, the system encourages excellence in other ways.

Entry to teacher education programs at university is highly competitive, with only 10-12 per cent of applicants being accepted. Up to 100 applications for a single teaching position in a school might be received.

As soon as any student shows signs of slipping behind, one-to-one or small group support is given. The system responds.

Brian and Jessica rather humorously explain how a Tasmanian author exclaimed: “If I hear any more about the wonders of Finland, I think I might throw up.” But the debate about Finland and its schools is a debate that’s due in Australia, or overdue.

This book is important because it offers a clear and informed sense of perspective on that and on the schooling debate overall.

I congratulate the authors on achieving that clarity. *Why Not the Best Schools?* is a timely book, and it is my pleasure to declare it launched!