BOOK DEBUNKS THE MYTHS

SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

By Anne Barrowclough

Julia Bucknell had been in a private school for nearly a year when her parents, Gillian and Sam, decided to move her back to the local public school in Yass, NSW, where her two sisters were thriving. Julia, 14, is now doing well there. But the couple's decision to educate their daughters in the public sector has lost the Bucknells a whole social circle; they have even been accused of ruining their children's lives. "We didn't sell them into the sex industry for heaven's sake," Gillian says. "We just sent them to a public school."

The Bucknells struggled with their decision. Although Sam had been privately educated, Gillian has never liked private schools, which she feels give pupils a sense of entitlement rather than personal or social responsibility. While Lucy, 15, and Prue, 12, loved their public school, where Lucy is a straight-A student hoping to become a doctor, Julia felt out of place when she started there and believed she would receive a better education at a private school. But while the academic standards were high at the expensive boarding school the Bucknells chose, they became unhappy with the pastoral care. Julia returned to Yass High School, where they are satisfied with the "respect and care" she receives. "Just as importantly, all my girls have learnt to get on with a wide social mix of people rather than the narrow range Julia met at private school," Gillian says. "Money can't buy that."

Samantha and Sarah Bridges (not their real names) have also benefited socially since they left their private school for the local public school in Cherrybrook, northwest Sydney, according to their mother, Anna. "In private school everyone is the same but the girls have now realised there's a whole world out there," she tells me. The girls, 15 and 13, privately educated since they were five, were doing well academically, but their parents removed them a year ago because they had become concerned at Samantha's Year 10 workload. "Samantha had four hours' homework a night," says her mother. "We'd have to tell her 'Enough!' at 10pm and she would be working all weekend. It was exhausting and stressful. I do think that private schools offer more academically – but at what cost?"

Now Samantha has half the workload and after three terms has maintained her grades, while Sarah is also doing well and making more friends than she had at private school. "We've learnt that you don't need to wear your children out to get a good academic result, and their social growth is just as important," says Anna, adding: "I think we get better value for our dollar now. The girls' private school had beautiful gardens and lovely seating, but that money was unnecessarily spent. Now, with the money we've saved on fees, we can afford one-to-one tutoring, which takes the girls to a higher level, and they are more rounded as people."

In Sydney's eastern suburbs, Mike Weale has a different story. He and his wife Deborah took their daughter Charlotte, now 15, out of the public school system after Year 6 and did the same with son Max, now 12, after Year 4, believing their learning had started to stagnate. Weale, a software company executive who was educated in British comprehensive schools (equivalent to public here) and moved to Sydney 20 years ago, struggled with the private versus public school concept. "I couldn't get my head around it for a long time," he says. "But in the end I didn't feel I had the choice but to send them private. I didn't want the children's education to suffer."

In the three years since the Weale children moved to private schools their grades have vastly improved. Charlotte, a good student, is in an elite sports program and Max has thrived in the more structured and disciplined environment of his private school. "My daughter is a bright girl but her last year at primary school was hardly worth showing up for," Weale says. "And my son was far off where he needed to be coming into high school. But now they're doing so much better. I'm a complete convert to the private system."

All three families want the best education for their children and each is adamant the system they have chosen is right. So who made the best choice – the Bridges and Bucknells, who believe their children are more rounded as people and have not suffered academically, or the Weales, who believe private education offers better discipline and academic results?

Going public: Gillian Bucknell with daughters Julia, Prue and Lucy

Private: Mike Weale, wife Deborah, Charlotte and Max

The debate over private and public schooling provokes fierce passions. To some, public schools have become education's bogeyman, places of academic failure, the reason Australia is sliding in international education rankings. To others, private schools are a waste of money and drain public resources that should be going to government schools.

Government schools educate the vast majority: out of a total school population of about 3.6 million, 2.3 million attend government schools compared with 737,000 in Catholic schools and 511,000 in independents. However, the independents had the largest proportional increase in student numbers in 2011-12 – 1.8 per cent (1.7 per cent for Catholic schools) compared with 1.2 per cent for government schools, according to the ABS. (A NSW Department of Education spokesman told me there is anecdotal evidence of a trend from private back to public schools at Year 10 for the last three years of education, but there is no academic research yet to verify this.)

No research offers definitive proof that either public schools or private schools produce better results at Year 12. Analysis by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) of results from international tests concludes that, once adjustments have been made for variations in the schools' socio-economic status (SES), there is no significant difference in average scores between government, independent and Catholic. "The socioeconomic background of the school is what matters, rather than the type of school," an ACER report concluded.

However, research published in 2009 in the *Australian Journal of Education* by analyst Gary Marks found that, after taking into account students' socio-economic backgrounds, Australian Tertiary Admission Ranks – the all-important scores required for entrance to tertiary courses – were eight ranks higher for students from independent schools and four ranks higher for those at Catholic schools compared to students from government schools. "We don't really know the reason for the difference," Marks says. "It could be that there is a stronger academic environment in private schools – they push kids a little more."

But judging between schools isn't as simple as comparing academic results. Because some private schools, like some public schools, have selective student intakes, they attract pupils who already have good achievement records and are more likely to come from higher socio-economic groups with greater levels of support at home. ACER chief executive Geoff Masters wrote recently: "The quality of education provided by a school is best judged not by its final results but by the difference it makes, taking into account students' starting points. A school making a large difference [value adding] to students' levels of achievement and life chances may deliver 'better education', despite its lower Year 12 results."

Ben Jensen, director of the Grattan Institute's school education program, believes the future lies in developing more measures of how a school adds value. At the moment researchers rely on complicated statistical analyses of data from Naplan tests conducted every two years from Year 3 to Year 9. "A lot of work needs to be done," Jensen says. "We are using Naplan data because these are the dominant national tests results." Based on value-adding, Jensen argues many public schools could be said to offer the better education. Those in disadvantaged areas which nevertheless inspire their students to do well include Holroyd High School in Sydney's western suburbs and Hume Central Secondary College in Melbourne, both of which have a higher percentage of pupils going on to university than the national average of 30 per cent, despite being in the lowest SES quartile.

Holroyd's principal Dorothy Hoddinott says complacency could be the reason some schools serving more privileged communities do not see as much progression in their pupils as schools such as hers. "There are schools whose progression data doesn't indicate much," she says. "[The pupils] are able to achieve good marks without lifting a finger; they have tertiary educated parents, they have books at home, they are sent for coaching, their parents are not worrying about where they're going to find the money to buy a pair of school shoes. If they don't [achieve highly] you would have to question what those schools are doing."

At Holroyd, 60 per cent of students come from refugee backgrounds and 85 per cent from non-English speaking backgrounds, yet 70 per cent go on to tertiary education (university and TAFE) and, of those, 40 per cent progress to university. "Where they are when they start with us is not where they are going to end up," Hoddinott says. "We aim for 100 per cent of our students to go on to tertiary education."

This attitude may help explain research from Monash University which found public school students who left Year 12 with lower marks than students from independent schools overtook them once they were at university. Ian Dobson, one of the researchers on the 2005 Monash study of 12,500 first-year students, explains: "Private school students have an advantage at exam time in Year 12 because they have access to more resources... This advantage evaporates when they reach university."

Jane Caro, the former advertising executive and author of two books on education, argues students from public schools who go on to tertiary education are more motivated than private pupils because they have had to work harder to get there. She is only half-joking when she says, "It must be a lot easier going from one underfunded institution to another."

Caro, who chose Mosman High School over the local private schools in Sydney for her two daughters, Polly and Charlotte, is a fervent advocate of public education. (Mosman High, like many other public schools on Sydney's lower North Shore, is high on the government's socio-educational index, with the majority of its pupils in the highest quartile.) Caro says she has been shunned by former friends for her support of the government system, but has no regrets. "People told me I was sacrificing my children to my principles," she says. "I was told that I was ripping off the system because I was sending them to public school when I could afford to pay private school fees."

She says the school gave her two daughters a "fantastic education" and the $300,000 saved on school fees between kindergarten and Year 12 was better spent on overseas trips and a farm she bought in the Hunter Valley, where the girls learnt about the natural world. It was, she says, a more educational use of their money than spending it on "sandstone gates and what someone once told me was 'a nicer class of kiddie'".

In their 2012 book *What Makes a Good School?*

Caro and Chris Bonnor compare private and public school education with labelled and own-brand foods on the supermarket shelf. "Most of the differences between schools are cosmetic and superficial," they argue. Caro believes if more middle-class parents went the "own-brand" way, resources would follow their commitment to the public system.

Many people support that in theory – until it comes to their own children's education. As Mike Weale says, "That's cutting-edge stuff and I don't disagree with it. But if I pull my children out of private school, their education will suffer." Weale also believes Caro's use of the money saved on fees is difficult to make work in practice. "It would be good for the girls on a holistic level but the grading, examining and other pre-requisites for tertiary education don't work like that. For me, school is about structure, discipline and good teaching. We really didn't have any choice but to go private."

Various studies endorse his emphasis on non-academic factors in parents' decision-making: safety comes first. They also look for the discipline, uniforms and tradition along with, slightly lower down, academic achievement and a good range of subjects. "People want to know their children are safe and they want visible signs of that," says Jensen. "Uniforms signal a certain culture and discipline. There's a belief out there that certain sectors are better at providing things that parents want."

There is concern across the board over a growing equity gap in Australia's schools. Recently released 2012 PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) results show that by Year 9, pupils in the lowest SES quartile are two and a half years behind those in the highest quartile. They also reveal that Australia's rankings have fallen in all subjects since 2009, from 15th to 19th in mathematics, 10th to 16th in science and 9th to 14th in reading. The results follow an ACER report in August which exposed a drop in the reading and maths levels of 15-year-olds and a growing divide between the most and least advantaged secondary schools in Australia between 2000 and 2012.

Some see this as proof that parents should flee the public system. But others regard it as a sign that the debate should go beyond the rivalry between private or public schools or the argument over who should get more funding. After all, this slippage has happened even as federal and state expenditure on education has increased by 40 per cent in the same decade, from $32.5 billion in 2002-03 to $46 billion in 2012-13. Many educationalists now advocate a focus on the quality of teaching rather than simply increased funding. Finland, for example, abandoned private education and climbed from the lowest ranking in the OECD in the 1970s to become one of the top-performing educational systems in the world.

According to its former director-general of education, Pasi Sahlberg, success lay in putting equity before achievement – that is, making needs-based funding a priority – and ensuring excellent teaching across all schools so that the need to choose one system over another would become redundant. Finland today invests in teacher training to a degree seen in few other developed nations. Further, only 10 per cent of the 7000 applicants each year for the country's Masters Program in teacher training (its basic teaching qualification) are accepted, ensuring an exceptionally high standard of graduates entering the profession. They improve throughout their careers via peer reviews, mentoring and continual research. Some of the best teaching systems in the world – South Korea, Singapore and Shanghai – also invest heavily in teacher training and practices.

Jane Caro: "sandstone gates" are a waste of money

Sydney's Holroyd has introduced mentoring and peer reviews for teachers, with excellent results. As principal, Hoddinott makes it clear to both students and teachers that being average is not good enough. "Good teaching is at the heart of what we do," she says. "We have put a lot of money into getting people to think about their teaching: how they teach and what they teach. Because we have high expectations of our children and of our teachers, we reap the rewards of that in learning." Other improvements include giving teachers time to diagnose student engagement and structure their classroom practices to improve them. "You have to change the [teaching] culture," says Hoddinott. "You can throw any amount of money at people but if you keep doing things the same way the money will only enable you to do that a little more lavishly. It won't change things."

Melbourne's Hume Central Secondary executive principal Glenn Proctor says the decision to make cultural change has also brought remarkable results there. "We're coming away from the model where teachers go into the classroom and shut the door and no one really knows what they are doing in there."

Like Holroyd, Hume serves a disadvantaged community in which 46 per cent of students come from the lowest SES quartile and in 2012, 65 per cent of the students who sat the Naplan tests came from a language background other than English. When Proctor arrived at the school five years ago, the school's academic performance was dismal. But between 2009 and 2011, Naplan results for Year 9 lifted on average 60 points and a review found that a performance gap for students entering Year 7 at Hume compared with students in similar schools was almost eliminated by Year 9.

Hume has a mentoring system for its teachers. Coaches come into classrooms as peer observers to offer advice and help, and teachers work together to design teaching methods. Importantly, the school has cut the classroom hours for teachers so they can concentrate on coaching and peer reviews. "It comes at a cost but we've seen real benefit to the teachers and to the students," says Proctor.

It is not only public schools that are doing this: Churchie Anglican school in Brisbane, among other private schools, has boosted results by introducing mentoring and peer reviews. As the row over Gonski education reforms continues, educators agree that at least some funding should be invested in teacher excellence.

The issue is not as simple as saying that Australia should blindly follow Finland, a monocultural country with fewer social challenges than Australia. But if some of its reforms were put into place it is possible that the public-private school debate could, in the end, become extraneous. Perhaps, as Jensen wrote recently, "It is time for a new story in Australian education." ●

WHY MONEY CAN'T GUARANTEE A QUALITY EDUCATION

DAVID GILLESPIE HAS GOOD NEWS FOR CASH-STRAPPED PARENTS

Photography Eddie Safarik

She would probably have been less shocked had I confessed to selling my children into slavery. The look of horror (with a tinge of outrage) said a truckload more than the "Oh, are you sure?" she finally managed to squeeze out. Nigella (name changed) is the proud mother of two kids who attended the same (government) preschool as our eldest and had then progressed to the same (government) primary school. At Year 4, she had shipped her children off to the most prestigious private boys' and girls' schools money could buy (in Brisbane). So when I announced that my wife Lizzie and I had decided our kids would be going to a government high school, the shock was palpable. "But," she spluttered, "didn't you go to Churchie? Surely you could get them in there as a legacy entry?" The idea that anyone might choose to have their kids educated in a public school seemed to be beyond any reasonable contemplation.

If people voting with their feet is any measure, Nigella speaks for the majority. In some Australian urban areas there are now more Year 11 and 12 children in private education than there are in state schools. But is it really the case that paying for education actually gets you a better result? Or that paying even more gets an even better result?

We have six kids, so the kind of eye-watering numbers that the automatic choice of sending them to my alma mater and its sister school implied ($1.3 million, I calculated) meant our kids were going public. I needed to know exactly what the research said about educational outcomes and money. And I really needed to know whether there were any smart choices I could make having decided on public education.

Much like medical research, educational research is arcane, hard to read and even harder to understand. Even worse, most of it appears to be based on hunches and feelings and very little of it on hard facts and actual trials. But once you strip away all the self-interest and the spin there are very clear messages about why some education systems and schools perform better than others.

The research tells us there's no correlation between how much you pay and the quality of the education your child is likely to receive. Parents desperate to escape a system that refuses to remove (and indeed actively protects) poorly performing teachers are susceptible to the promise of better results if only they can pay for them. The wealthiest families dominate the independent schools, which draw almost half their population from the top quarter of income

earners in Australia and 73 per cent of their students from the top half of the income scale. Government school students dominate at the lower end of the economic spectrum; these schools draw 36 per cent of their students from the lowest quarter of Australian incomes. Catholic schools are somewhat more balanced; 57 per cent of their students come from the top half of the income scale.

Non-government schools do have more money than government schools, and in some independent schools that money makes its way into the pockets of better-performing teachers and more administration staff, but more commonly all that extra dosh just ends up in new

buildings. Studies have consistently shown that when you adjust for the socioeconomic status of the children in the systems, all three Australian systems are equally effective (or ineffective). Paying more for education will definitely get you nicer buildings and newer computers. And it will definitely allow your child to hang around with more kids of "his class" (assuming that's a benefit).

The single advantage that independent schools have over government and Catholic schools is that their staffing policies are not dictated by union-negotiated enterprise agreements. The principal of an independent school has much greater power to remove underperforming staff and hire effective teachers than their colleagues in either the government or Catholic sectors. But a leader is no more likely to employ and develop effective staff if they themselves are incompetent or if their hands are tied by a board (or parents) dictating staffing policies (as often happens). Yes, they may be able to have better staff, but that's no guarantee that they do.

The short way of saying this is that paying for an education is often unlikely to get you a better academic result than you'd get anyway. What I found during my research is that some things – teachers, principals – count a lot, while other things that most parents worry about – class size, school size, composite classes, fancy buildings – don't matter at all.

Teachers and leaders matter

Good teachers get good results (significant and measurable gains in the academic performance of their students). Poor teachers achieve exactly the opposite. In one Queensland study, the quality of the teacher was shown to matter to the tune of an astounding full academic year's worth of learning when you compare the best teachers with the worst.

Researchers involved in The Texas Teacher Quality Study found that teachers at the top of the quality distribution were able to move their students forward one and a half years in just a year, while the worst teachers were only able to move their kids forward half a year. The study also found that experience makes a difference, at least initially. Teachers who are new in the job are much less effective. But after three years, experience doesn't appear to affect teacher performance at all.

Until recently we haven't had any comparable research on teacher effectiveness in Australia, but in 2010, Andrew Leigh (formerly a statistician from the Australian National University and now a member of federal parliament) completed a major study of teacher effectiveness using the standardised test scores for 90,000 Queensland students between 2001 and 2004. The results were almost identical to those delivered by the US research. A teacher who's better than 90 per cent of their peers will achieve in six months what a teacher in the bottom 10 per cent achieves in a full year.

And this doesn't apply just to primary school. A large study in Chicago showed the effect was, if anything, more pronounced in high school teachers. Good teachers eliminate disadvantage. In comparison to a bad teacher, a good teacher will provide your child with a two-for-one deal: two years of education in a year. If they get two shockers in a row they're on a path to academic destruction.

It doesn't matter if the school is mixed or single-sex

I don't know a parent who doesn't have a view on whether schools should be single-sex or mixed. The demand for single-sex schooling appears to persist despite a spectacular lack of evidence that it makes the slightest bit of difference for either sex. In 2005, the US Department of Education conducted a systematic review of 2221 studies on single-sex education. They found a performance gap between single-sex schools (and classes) and coeducational schools, but that gap could be explained entirely by the differences in the socioeconomic make-up of the students likely to attend a single-sex school (which in the United States are usually private). When the researchers looked for longer term measures of success, any positive effects of single-sex schooling vanished entirely. Without even adjusting for background, they found no differences in academic performance beyond high school, university graduation rates or the likelihood of undertaking postgraduate study.

Closer to home, the WA Education Department reviewed the inconclusive evidence and decided to find out if it could detect a measurable benefit by trying single-sex classes in its high schools. The pilot program was implemented in five public high schools commencing in 2006, but after three years of trials in Years 8 to 10 classrooms, they found there was "no conclusive evidence in any school to indicate that single gender classrooms supported improved student outcomes".

Composite classes don't matter

Multi-age classes mix students of more than one (usually two, but sometimes more) grades in one classroom being taught by one teacher. They're fairly common in small schools (less than 200 students – just under half of all Australian primary schools) because of uneven distribution of the numbers of children in each

grade and the need to stay below the mandated upper limits on class size. Most parents I've met think multi-age classes are a good idea if their child is one of the youngest in the class but a bad idea if they're one of the older kids. The resounding answer from the research community is that it makes not the slightest jot of difference. Not only does multi-grading not have any positive or negative effect on academic performance, it doesn't change any of the "soft" measures either (like attitude to school, behaviour and so on).

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) ran a study which was extraordinarily detailed and allowed the researchers to answer a burning question most of the previous studies hadn't: Does it matter if your little pumpkin is in the Year 4 end of a 3-4 or in the Year 3 end? Not a single one of any of the possible combinations (and they had them all) showed any difference at all. The research did reveal, however, that some principals may have a tendency to assign their best and brightest teaching staff to multi-age classes.

Homework doesn't make a lot of difference

When you're dragging six kids through the school system you get to attend your fair share of parent meetings. And I reckon I haven't been to one yet when someone didn't complain that insufficient homework was being given, followed quickly by someone else complaining that too much was being handed out. Because it's such a focus for parental angst, there's no shortage of research on every conceivable aspect of doing schoolwork at home. But the research in favour of homework is far from convincing, and the latest work suggests it's a complete waste of everybody's time.

In 2006, Harris Cooper, the director of Duke University's Program in Education in North Carolina, led a team that analysed the vast majority of the homework studies performed to that point. The studies revealed that there's no benefit to assigning homework to children in years equivalent to Australian primary schools. Indeed, no study has ever found a benefit to assigning homework to children of that age. There were, however, modest benefits to high school students in that those who did more homework tended to score better on standardised tests. Even the most persuasive studies are only demonstrating a mild effect and then only really in maths.

Try hard to avoid moving

Australia has one of the most highly mobile populations in the Western world. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that 30 per cent of residents (from households with children) move at least once every three years. The Queensland Department of Education keeps detailed records on every student and (uniquely in Australia) can track them no matter which school they attend. Their most recent analysis reported that, of the 41,261 students enrolled in Year 7 in 2006, one in five had moved schools two or more times in primary school and one in 20 had moved four or more times (in six years). The researchers concluded that the best thing we can do for our kids is keep them in the same school. The children who obtained the best results were those who hadn't changed schools at all, and there was a direct relationship between (lack of) performance and the number of moves. In the last three decades there have been more than 40 major studies on the issue. The results have been surprisingly consistent. Every time a child is moved, their education will be set back between three and four months, their reading and maths scores will decline, and they'll struggle to keep pace with their peer group.

The perfect school

The research tells us what a perfect school should be. It also tells us what it won't be, or, at the very least, helps us identify all the red herrings hung along the school fence. It might have gorgeous grounds, three Olympic-sized swimming pools, its own personal sports stadium, a single sex, fabulous tertiary entry results, new computers, high fees, very small class sizes, and be very small and have no multi-age classes. But it might have none of those things and still be an extraordinary performer when it comes to delivering the only thing that matters – a high-quality education for your child.

The perfect school will have a highly effective leader who engages the community and teachers, who mentors those teachers and gets the best from them. It will have a teaching culture of continuous learning. Teachers will approach their task not as underpaid, glorified child care but as an opportunity to improve their skills and their students' outcomes. And the perfect school may do absolutely nothing else. It may accomplish these two things in a caravan on a mining site, in a sandstone building on Sydney Harbour or in any possible location in between. What it looks like and what it costs are very likely to be completely irrelevant.

A truly extraordinary school will provide a music program and it will teach at least one foreign language. It will teach children how to learn rather than just what to learn. It will use technology to ensure students have immediate feedback and teachers have the time to help those who need it most. Homework won't be a priority but the school will work very hard at keeping parents in the loop. It won't stream students academically, but it will accelerate the truly gifted and will definitely not rely on whole language as a means of teaching literacy.

In other words, its perfection will be almost completely invisible to all but the participants. Its outcomes will in no way depend on the advantage or disadvantage the children bring through the school gate. All of this is quite easily delivered within the existing budgets for government school education (or less) if the school leader is skilled and motivated. They're not the majority, but these schools do exist. The trick is to find them. ●

Edited extract from *Free Schools: How to get your kids a great education without spending a fortune*, by David Gillespie (Macmillan Australia, $29.99)