

Teach First New Zealand Alumni Retreat 2017

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Educational comparisons between Australia and New Zealand are very easy to make, perhaps due to our similar governmental structure and our global proximity to one another. Based on 2015 PISA data (OECD 2015), it is clear that Australia has some things they can learn from New Zealand in a variety of areas.

New Zealand scored higher than Australia in Reading, Science and Mathematics (Table 1).

Students in New Zealand also, on average, report enjoying and being more enthusiastic about learning science than in Australia (Table 2).

On the flip side of the coin, Australian students were found to be marginally more resilient than New Zealander students, and the performance variations between students were found to be

Table 1: Performance scores for Australia, New Zealand & OECD (OECD 2015)

	Science	Mathematics	Reading
Australia	510	494	503
New Zealand	513	495	509
OECD Average	493	490	493

Table 2: Enjoyment index for students learning Science (OECD 2015)

	Enjoyment Index
Australia	0.12
New Zealand	0.20
Average	0.02

narrower (OECD 2015), suggesting lower levels of disadvantage (at least, in part).

Both countries demonstrated decreased performance in science, but both countries demonstrated an improvement inequity (with New Zealand showing greater improvement than Australia; New Zealand above OECD average and Australia below).

At the end of April this year, I had the privilege to attend a Teach First New Zealand (Teach First NZ) Alumni retreat in Auckland. Teach First NZ is a partner organisation with Teach For Australia, both of which are under the umbrella of Teach For All (<http://teachforall.org/en>) – a global movement dedicated to tackling socioeconomic disadvantage in education through teaching and leadership. I was joined by other guests including another Teach For Australia Alumnus, and representatives from Teach For Thailand and Teach For America (Hawaii) too.

At the retreat, a variety of guests associated with Teach First NZ, the University of Auckland, and local education organisations were invited to share their wisdom and insight into education. Following the retreat, I was able to attend Onehunga High School – a socioeconomically disadvantaged school just outside Auckland – and shadow some Teach First NZ Alumni who teach at the school.

The education systems of Australia and New Zealand are similar in a lot of ways, but I found that there were striking differences too. Here are my top three reflections.

1 The New Zealand curriculum

While both Australia and New Zealand are in discussions about ideas such as project-based learning and mastery-based learning (and I am yet to fully explore the fine details of the New Zealand curriculum) the general feedback from Teach First NZ Alumni

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was that the curriculum is built in such a way that it is flexible and conducive to the introduction of project-based learning. Based on my own brief observations, this is made possible by brief yet specific objectives for each level of achievement.

2 The empowerment of Maori and Pacific Islander people

Anyone who has been involved with education in Australia will know that the education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is an ongoing national challenge. After one day in New Zealand, it was already very clear to me how engaged educators are with Maori culture – the Indigenous peoples of New Zealand. At the retreat, local attendees would fade in and out of using Maori language during presentations and discussions, songs would be sung as a sign of thanks to presenters (as that is Maori custom), and activities involved further references to Maori culture and customs in a variety of ways. When I commented to attendees on the strong impact this made on me, they shrugged it off as something that may be misconstrued as common due to the retreat, but they stressed that this practice was not commonplace. I was told that not all people speak the Maori language, but most (if not, all) participants in the Teach First NZ program had opted to learn it.

Over the next few days, I discovered that there are popular government-funded Maori television channels seeking to celebrate and preserve Maori language and culture. Further to this, on my day visiting Onehunga High School, I found myself in science classes that featured posters of The Periodic Table, The Digestive System, and Hazardous Chemicals – all printed in the Maori language.

Discussions at the retreat referenced ‘The Long Brown Tail’: the lower-percentiles of academic achievement in schools, which consist primarily of Maori and Pacific Islander students (not dissimilar to issues we have in Australia). But from what I saw, the strategies being put in place have a sense of unity behind the goal to drive improvement for these students. Although some of these strategies are being put in place more slowly in Australia, and others are not practicable due to a variety of factors, I was very impressed with the collective ownership held by all teachers to help disadvantaged students.

3 The Starpath Project at Onehunga High School

Lastly, a framework that is being implemented at Onehunga High School struck me as very innovative, and after some research, it became apparent that its implementation has become quite widespread over the past few years. The Starpath Project is a research-driven, student-centred school model which provides holistic support for individual students. Each student has a tutor teacher (otherwise known as a form teacher), who is the primary (and for the most part, only) point of contact with parents. They act as a funnel for information to and from the student and parent, interacting with teachers via what are known as ‘Core Teacher Meetings’. This not only reduces the conferencing time between teachers and parents significantly, but it also allows each student to have one teacher who can see the whole picture and

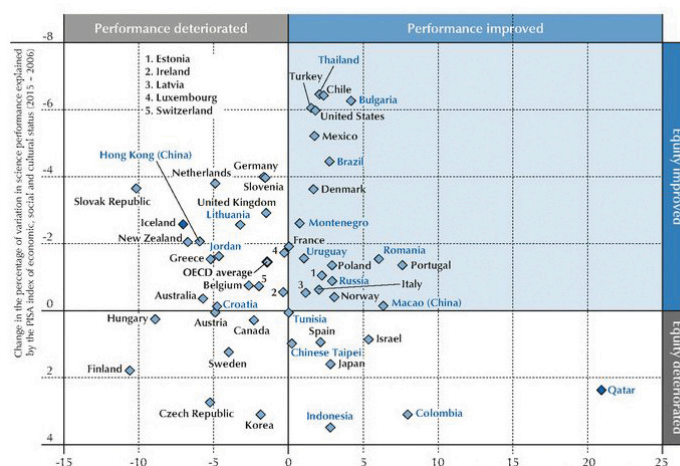


Figure 1: Change between 2006 and 2015 in the strength of the socio-economic gradient and average 3-year trend in science performance (OECD 2015)

advocates for that student. This makes engagement with career counselling and goal-setting (whether regarding academics, behaviour, or another area) far easier.

In the wise words of the late Rita Pierson, “Every child deserves a champion, an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be,” and it appears that the model enables this to happen. The model has its foundations in contemporary research, and is propelled forward by local data such as case studies, which gives me confidence in the ongoing success of its use. Even though my description of The Starpath Project has only begun to scratch the surface, I believe that these points alone elicit exploration into some sort of parallel model being implemented in my own context.

Overall, my journey to New Zealand was extremely insightful. I’m grateful for the opportunity to participate and I look forward to discussing the experience with my school to see what we can implement to further improve outcomes for our students. I understand that neither system is perfect, but due to our similarities, we must ensure that we leverage each other’s ideas in order to promote improvement in equity and performance across both countries.

Further reading

OECD 2015, *PISA 2015 Results (Volume I)*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

About the author

Adam B Inder is an alumnus of the Teach For Australia ‘Leadership Development Program’ – a program that recruits outstanding individuals to commit to teach in a socioeconomically disadvantaged school for two years while gaining their Master’s degree as a teaching qualification. As part of the first rollout of Teach For Australia ‘Associates’ in Western Australia, he began his teaching journey in 2015 at Balga Senior High School (the lowest ICSEA school in metropolitan Western Australia). As of 2017, Adam is the Head of Mathematics, Science & Technologies at Clarkson Community High School, a socioeconomically disadvantaged school located in the northwestern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia. He is passionate about equity and high-quality education, with his own goal echoing the vision of Teach For Australia – to play a part in eliminating socioeconomic disadvantage.