Great teacher = Great results?

John Hattie is Professor of Education and Director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute at the University of Melbourne. His research interests include models of teaching and learning. He is a proponent of evidence based quantitative research methodologies on the influences on student achievement. Hattie undertook the largest ever meta-analysis of quantitative measures of the effect of different factors on educational outcomes. His book, Visible Learning, is the result of this.

His studies looked at five aspects that contributed to learning and they were the contribution from the student, contribution from home, contribution from the school, contribution from the curriculum and the contribution from teachers. I would guess that if we were to ask the general public about who/which of these five factors has the greatest influence on learning, most would say the teacher.

Within his study on the impact of teachers on learning, he looked at features such as teacher training, teacher subject matter knowledge, the quality of teaching, teacher-student relationships, professional development, teacher expectations and labelling of students. Hattie’s found the most critical of these aspects within the teacher realm, are the quality of the teachers and the nature of the teacher-student relationship. Clearly with hand on heart, I can say that we have both of these at All Saints’. He also found medium effects related to teacher expectations particularly when lower expectations are held for all their students and to teacher professional development effects on achievement. Again, teachers at All Saints’ attend in-service courses aimed at improving student outcomes and they certainly have high expectations for their students, as do students for each other.

It is therefore interesting to note an article sent to me by Mr Wayne Feebrey (Head of HSIE) the other day. Great teacher = Great result? Wrong: the key issue with this article was that teachers aren’t actually directly responsible for the learning in schools. When it comes down to it, children are the ones who actually have to do the learning. Unfortunately, much to the frustration of every teacher, and parent, children don’t always do what they are told, or learn what we attempt to teach them. What’s more, children are often immature, and they don’t always know what is best for them. To further complicate matters, some children find school and learning easy and some don’t, often for reasons out of their and our control. With the same teacher in the classroom, some students learn a lot more than others even though they are getting the same instruction; while teachers teach, students are ultimately responsible for what they learn. Hattie’s research would probably also back this up and find that some children’s learning is due to their own efforts and not of the school or the teacher.

So does that mean that teachers do not matter? It certainly does not! We need good, well-educated and inspiring teachers. However as the article concludes, schools are a very thin layer of icing on a very, very big cake. As highly skilled, dedicated and inspirational as the icing might be, in the end it is the cake that counts.