

Good news for anxious parents

By Jane Caro

There was good news for both parents and kids yesterday. Yet another study, this time from Melbourne, has confirmed that kids who attended comprehensive public schools are doing better at the end of their first year at university than kids who attended either private or selective schools.

This is good news for all parents, not just those whose kids attend public schools, because it means our belief that our kids are in danger of failing or being left behind if we do not scrimp and save to send them to a posh school, is false.

Parents who have previously felt they must do without family holidays or a second car, to pay the private school fees, can take some of that pressure off themselves.

Even better, the feeling many parents of primary school age kids have that they need to send their kids to coaching colleges, or police hours of homework to get them into selective schools, can also be dismissed.

If we are prepared to let go of our anxiety, and happily send our kids to the local public school on the basis of evidence like this, perhaps the benefits to our kids will be even greater than a more successful university career.

Perhaps we will once again allow them to be kids, to play outside after school with their mates like we used to do when we were kids, or laze about developing their creative imagination doing what looks like nothing, or spend an afternoon reading a book, rather than sitting them down in front of a computer to cram.

After all, if you are not spending thousands of after tax dollars a year on a posh school, perhaps you will be less alarmed if they lollygag around a bit, just being kids.

Indeed, I wonder if the more relaxed attitude of many parents who currently send their children to comprehensive public schools is one of the reasons such kids actually end up doing better at uni?

Not everyone is going to let go of their anxiety so easily, however. Some may feel that it is still important to send their kids to private schools to maximise their chances of getting into uni in the first place, because the same studies also show they do get an average 5 mark advantage in the HSC.

Looked at more closely, however, this doesn't hold much water. Study after study has shown that it's not whether you send your kids to private or public schools that makes a difference to their performance; it's social class. Private and selective schools do better in the HSC because they educate more kids from higher socio-economic backgrounds than public schools. So if you are a middle class parent with a middle class income, you need have no worries on that score. If your kid is not the brightest in the bunch, it is still much cheaper to hire tutors, as required, than fork out for private school fees. Your kids will have just the same chance of getting into uni and, as an added bonus, more chance of doing better when they get there.

Others have argued that the effect is a result of public school kids getting exposed to better teachers (private school standard, I suppose they mean) at uni. However there are problems with this hypothesis too. Firstly, it does not explain why the performance of private school kids actually falls when they get to uni. Nor does it explain why selective school students do less well. After all, teachers in selective schools are not themselves selected. They are the same people who teach in comprehensive public schools, as are most private school teachers, truth be told.

So why do public school kids do better than kids from private and selective schools by the end of their first year in university?

There may not be a definitive answer as yet, but I'm willing to risk a couple of possibilities.

Perhaps, as I've said, the general lessening in the pressure and anxiety surrounding a kid's education is one reason. Another may be that kids in the less authoritarian atmosphere of a comprehensive public school actually learn real discipline; self discipline. Perhaps they absorb the lesson that the consequences of failing to do their work are bad results, not just a boring detention. Perhaps, bright public school kids are more used to having to motivate themselves, precisely because they have not been driven and hot-housed.

And I'm sure public school kids find the transition from one under-funded, poorly resourced educational institution to another, less difficult than kids who are used to more salubrious surroundings.

Maybe when we mollycoddle and pamper our kids so much, we're not doing them any real favours at all.