



The Journal of the Education Research Group of Adelaide
ISSN 1835-6850

Volume 1, Number 3, February 2010

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Editorial

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.
Leo Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*.

In his book, "guns, germs and steel", which investigated the development of human civilisations around the world, Jared Diamond used what he called the Anna Karenina Principle to explain why some civilisations seemed to develop more quickly than others. The idea was that happy or successful enterprises depend on a whole range of conditions and unless they are all met progress will be retarded. Diamond argued that the different rates of development of civilisations were based, at least partly, on the ability to domesticate wild animals. Now, some animals were suitable for domestication while others were not and application of the principle argued that unless the wild animal had all of the requirements for successful domestication (must breed in captivity, have a good temperament and be able to be herded, have a stable social structure and a good and efficient growth rate) then domestication was not viable. The key point that Diamond was making was that it was not the humans, but the animals that existed in their region, that determined the rate or level of development possible.

Diamond's Anna Karenina Principle might also be applied to teachers; perhaps all successful teachers are alike, while unsuccessful ones are unsuccessful in their own particular way. If true, this then leads to two complementary aspects that should be dealt with in teacher assessment.

Firstly, it calls into question the usual practice of measuring teachers against a list of desirable attributes and practices without giving consideration to the concept that there may be an optimum combination. This has been noted in the past by researchers investigating the so-called ideal teacher profile who wondered if, in fact, one did exist, and if it did what it looked like (e.g. Gibney & Wiersma, 1986, *J. Teacher Education*, 37, 41-45; Marsh & Bailey, 1993, *J. Higher Education*, 64, 1-18).

Secondly, the success or otherwise of teachers might be determined by factors outside their control. Teachers may be able to do all the right things but if the environment in which the teacher works is not right then no matter how good he or she is, it simply will not work. This sort of argument is currently being run in the school sector, brought on with the implementation of NAPLAN (National Assessment Program Literacy And Numeracy). It is an argument that Jared Diamond might accept, but he would be no match for the current Federal Government Minister who has driven this to implementation.

In terms of educational research, both aspects provide ample areas for work although the question of the ideal teacher profile is the one that seems to have been dealt with less often and yet is potentially the more important.

David Walker
Editor