Education and disadvantaged children

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Abstract
The difficulties faced with specific reference to meeting the special needs of Aboriginal children, children with disabilities, children from non-English speaking backgrounds, and children in rural and particularly small and isolated communities are discussed. The efforts by schools concerning children's access to computers and participation in school activities including sports, excursions, social events including fun days which should not be limited by their families' financial situation, is highlighted.

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The right of every child to an education that develops their intellectual, social and physical abilities and prepares them for an "active and responsible life" as an adult is enshrined in Australia’s obligations as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and spelt out in specific State-based legislation.

At a state level, one of the key objects of the NSW Education Act 1990 is to provide an education to all children of school-age in New South Wales, “mitigating educational disadvantages arising from the child’s gender or from geographic, economic, social, cultural, lingual or other causes”. There is specific reference to meeting the special needs of Aboriginal children, children with disabilities, children from non-English speaking backgrounds, and children in rural and particularly small and isolated communities.

Despite these lofty aims, the evidence is clear that Australia is not doing well in meeting the needs of these groups of children, in mitigating educational disadvantage or in investing in education at a national or state level. Several international reports and Australian-based commentaries indicate that Australia is doing more poorly than many other developed countries in meeting the educational needs of disadvantaged children – particularly Indigenous children, those from low socio-economic backgrounds and children with disabilities. A recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
(OECD) report indicated that while Australian students are performing well above the OECD average in reading, maths and scientific literacy, there was a large gap between the best and worst performing students in Australia².

The OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results confirm the marked differences in educational outcomes for Australian children according to where they live and what school they attend. The OECD report concluded that “Australia has a long way to go compared with some other countries in compensating for socio-economic disadvantage” (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2001). In 2006, Professor Barry McGaw, the Director of the Education Research Institute at the University of Melbourne indicated continuing concern, saying that social background is more strongly related to educational achievement in Australia than in many OECD countries (The Australian, 3 November 2006, p. 9).

Similarly, a report by UNICEF in 2002 on educational disadvantage in rich nations found that Australia dropped 10 places from 5th to 15th (out of 24) on a measure of relative disadvantage (Zyngier, 2004), and rural and regional students in Australia were ranked 25th out of 40 countries whereas urban students were in the top 10. Australia was at the low end of OECD expenditure on public education, and unlike other countries, the proportion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) being 'spent' on public education is decreasing in real terms. At the same time, the proportion of students completing secondary school is stagnating or decreasing.

Apart from the obvious social equity and justice issues involved, the continuing gap between high performing / high socio-economic status (SES) students and low performing / low SES students means that there are adverse consequences for disadvantaged children and young people and very significant social and economic consequences and long-term costs. The negative impact of poverty on student achievement and engagement is well documented (Black, 2006; Vinson, 2002). Australian students from "low SES backgrounds are:

- Twice as likely as students from high SES backgrounds to underperform in literacy and numeracy
- More likely to have negative attitudes to school, truant, be suspended or expelled and leave school early

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1 Articles 28 and 29 of the UN Convention state that every child has a right to an education which should be directed at developing the child’s to their ‘fullest potential’ and which prepares them for an active and responsible life as an adult, fostering respect for basic human rights and developing respect for the child’s own cultural and national values and those of others. Article 23 makes it clear that this includes children with disabilities who have the right to enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance, and facilitate the child’s active participation in the community.

2 In particular, the OECD findings indicate continuing poor performance for indigenous students who are much less likely than their non-indigenous counterparts to attend school, to have adequate levels of literacy and numeracy, to complete secondary school and to participate in any post-secondary schooling. This differential has a long and complex history and is clearly associated with the very marked social disadvantage and health problems of Indigenous children and young people in Australia.
Opinion piece

• More likely to struggle with the transition from school to work, and
• Less likely to enter university or to succeed in vocational education courses” (Black, 2006).

Lower educational achievement is in turn associated with poorer longer-term earning capacity, poorer mental and physical health, and an increased incidence of homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse and criminal activity (Black, 2006; Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2006; Vinson, 2004).

Given these significant longer term consequences for young people and for the society, what can schools do and what do they need to help them overcome the considerable challenges involved? Adequate and equitable funding of schools is of course essential. So also is free and equitable support for education to families.

Children’s access to computers and participation in school activities including sports, excursions, social events including fun days etc should not be limited by their families’ financial situation. Despite schools offering flexibility for families in payment, schooling costs add further stress to some families. Free public education really needs to be just that, free for children and their families.

Disadvantaged children also need access to computers and the internet to ensure they are benefiting from technological advancements, at home and at school. While a number of excellent initiatives are in place across NSW schools for students who need assistance, other universal government funded measures are wasted: $50 per child is clearly not enough to outfit a child for school, especially for families with few resources; for families that are well-off, it makes no difference.

The importance of providing support and intervening early – before children start school – is now being recognised and this is encouraging but the benefits need to be demonstrated to convince government and the public of the value of this investment. There is a need for further and expanded targeted programs for students who can be identified at key transition points: entry to early childhood, entry to kindergarten, graduation to high school and by other mechanisms including the Basic Skills Tests etc.

Programs such as the Smith Family Learning for Life are working to overcome a lack of focus and support for education in children’s homes and communities once the children are at school. Making sure that children have a nutritional start to the day and that they have access to computers, books, and tutoring and mentoring may be useful steps in redressing educational disadvantage within the home and school environment.

The key may, however, be engagement – of both children and their communities – not just resources, though resources may help this to happen. For example, increased community support made a difference in one particularly disadvantaged area in NSW. “In 1999 Windale was in the worst 1 per cent of NSW postcodes for instance of child abuse. In 2004 it was in the best 25 per cent” (NAPCAN, 2005).

As one of the most socially disadvantaged communities in NSW, a group representing key stakeholders and Government departments worked collaboratively to implement a range
of initiatives in the school and local community that engaged families and built social capital, developing into the Windale’s ‘School as Community’ Centre. As Vinson pointed out, the engagement of parents in the education of their children improves children’s learning outcomes, and engagement of the community and community agencies in schools opens up new opportunities and facilitates richer social and educational support for students (Vinson, 2002).

Engaged and experienced teachers are also likely to be critical. As Vinson (2002) notes:

*The many young teachers who swell the ranks in disadvantaged areas need the leavening of more experienced hands, just as pupils with a sparse educational background need the experience and skill of seasoned teachers* (p. 237).

Speaking at the recent Queensland Child Safety Conference, Karen

Healy raised similar issues in relation to young inexperienced workers in child protection who are often allocated to the most difficult work (intake and assessment), pointing out that this practice, and the lack of proper supervision and mentoring, has negative consequences for both the workers and their ‘clients’. Healy suggests that this type of practice in both teaching and social work is the equivalent of allocating the youngest and least experienced medical students to accident and emergency departments in hospitals with poor supervision.

Also critical is student engagement. Understanding what children and young people themselves see as important and what they think what make schools better for them and other children is essential. Children and young people highlight the importance of the relationships they form with their teachers and with other adults at their school in keeping them engaged in schools and learning. These adults need to be friendly, respectful, engaging and caring (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005).

The students who entered The Sydney Morning Herald ‘The School I’d Like’ competition echoed the importance of their teachers being caring, genuinely interested and skilled teachers (Sydney Morning Herald, Weekend Edition 4-5 June, 2005, p. 37).

They also wanted more flexibility and diversity in curriculum choices as well as teaching and learning strategies that meet their needs (CREATE Foundation, 2004; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005; Sydney Morning Herald, 2005).
Opinion piece

They want opportunities to progress further if they are achieving well, to catch up if they are behind and to be supported with their learning difficulties (CREATE Foundation, 2004).

Children and young people also want fair rules and the fair application of sanctions as well as a safe school environment where bullying and other problems at school are effectively responded to (Child Guardian, 2006; CREATE Foundation, 2004; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005).

They want their school to be an inviting place that provides good facilities for their use, in particular computer and internet access, alongside technical support (CREATE Foundation, 2004; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005; Sydney Morning Herald, 2005).

But most important were respectful relationships. As Zyngier (2004) concluded:

*A socially just pedagogy must be inclusive, engaging and enabling … and encourage relationships that enable and engage students in valued and worthwhile activities, linking learning not just to the community but also empowering students to use their own authentic knowledge, values and culture to take control over their own lives.* (p. 9).

References


