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Improving Educational Equity in Australia



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What is equity?

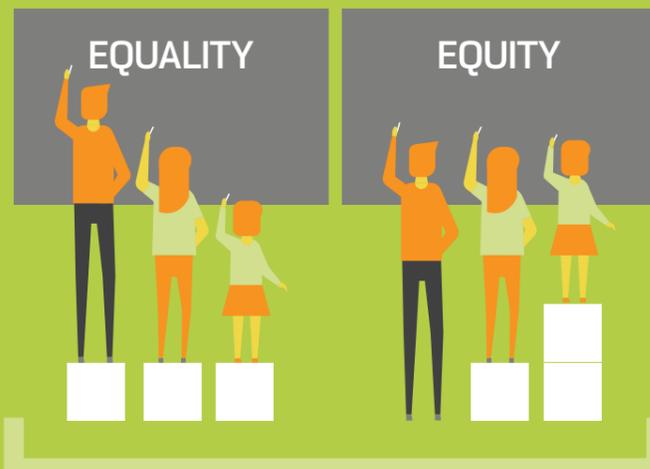
If Australia is truly to offer a 'fair go' for all, then students' backgrounds should not be a determining factor in their educational performance. The Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) promotes excellence and equity in Australian schools, highlighting the need to:

- provide all students with access to high-quality schooling free from discrimination based on gender, language, sexual orientation, pregnancy, culture, ethnicity, religion, health or disability, socioeconomic background or geographic location;
- ensure that Indigenous status and socioeconomic disadvantage ceases to be a significant determinant of educational outcomes; and
- reduce the effect of other sources of disadvantage, such as disability, homelessness, refugee status and remoteness.

Equity means removing barriers and overcoming background factors as the key determinant of disparity in student outcomes across Australia.

Equity vs. Equality

Equality means treating everyone 'the same'; for example, individuals under the law. Equity means that in order for people to be treated fairly (and thus 'the same'), people may require different levels and types of support. It is recognised that systems and structures create levels of disadvantage — some groups and individuals benefit in society more than others. Treating people differently in order to create a fairer society is a commonplace practice; e.g. differentiated tax rates, means-testing for social benefits, and the 'Gonski' school funding reforms.



Why does equity in education matter?

Equity is important so that all people can fully participate in society, as enshrined in documents such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). In addition to the human rights imperative, the costs to society and Australia's prosperity are substantial (DEEWR, 2011; Field, Kuczera & Pont, 2007; The Nous Group, 2011). There are moral, economic, political, social and educational purposes and benefits to correcting inequality.

Equity is the hallmark of excellent education systems—the countries with the greatest equity also have better performance and achievement. Since 2009, Australia's performance on PISA has declined and equity has also not improved (OECD, 2012, 2018; UNESCO, 2018). Postcodes and parent income levels are persistent determinants of student performance on NAPLAN, which would not be true in an equitable system (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014; Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016). UNICEF's 2018 report 'An Unfair Start: Inequality in Children's Education in Rich Countries', ranked Australia 30th out of 38 countries in terms of educational equality. (UNICEF Office of Research, 2018).



Socio-economic factors and poverty

More than 1.5 million Australians are classified as deeply or very deeply disadvantaged (Martinez & Perales, 2017, p. 494). Alleviating this would result in vast social and economic benefits for Australian society, as reducing poverty would improve student academic performance as well as the psychological wellbeing of children (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Many Australians are victims of 'place poverty', where socio-economic disadvantage has become more and more geographically concentrated (Powell, Boyne, & Ashworth, 2001). According to the 'Poverty in Australia 2018', one in six (17.3%) Australian children live below the poverty line. From an international perspective, Australia's poverty rate is ranked the 14th highest out of 36 OECD countries. (Davidson, et al, 2018). Further, the OECD Country Report on Australia identified that 51% of disadvantaged students in Australia attend disadvantaged schools, i.e. schools where other students tend to be disadvantaged as well. However, where disadvantaged students attend advantaged schools, they score 86 points higher, or the equivalent of 3 years of school, than those attending disadvantaged schools. (OECD, 2018). The total

proportion of disadvantage in a school has a great effect on student outcomes:

All students perform relatively lower when they attend disadvantaged schools; however, disadvantaged students suffer the most. The benefit to disadvantaged students of not attending disadvantaged schools is also evident. Disadvantaged students in average socioeconomic level schools scored about 25 points, or almost a year of schooling, higher than those in disadvantaged schools. Similarly, disadvantaged students in advantaged schools scored another 33 points... equal to more than one year of schooling (Thomson, Bortoli & Underwood, 2015, p. 218).

School choice policies have led to concentrations of disadvantage and exacerbated disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged schools in Australia.



Rural and remote students

Geographic disadvantage strongly impacts on rural and remote Australian children's ability to succeed in school. Students in rural areas perform less well in the basic competencies, have fewer subject options and limited career opportunities than those who live in metropolitan areas. Rural regions in Australia are more prone to experience high levels of poverty than in urban areas (National Rural Health Alliance (Australia), 2013). This impacts not only individual students and families but the entire Australian economy – a recent review by the Gonski Institute for Education found that redressing the education gap for rural students could add \$56 billion to Australia's GDP (Holden & Zhang, 2018)



Other factors

Many groups are disadvantaged by the education system in a range of ways. Examples include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students from refugee backgrounds and other students who have experienced trauma, students with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, and students with a disability. Many gifted and talented students, while they may appear to be "achieving well", still underachieve relative to their potential. Improving equity in schools means recognising and addressing the needs of these students.

What can be done to improve equity in Australian education?



Re-evaluate school choice

School choice policies have failed to improve overall system outcomes and have led to significant disadvantages for poorer children, including increased inequality, segregation and lower performance (Parker, Marsh, Jerrim, Guo & Dicke, 2018). School choice has resulted in increased concentrations of disadvantaged students, and these schools tend to suffer from a range of complex issues including less resourcing, increased behaviour problems, less experienced teachers, lower student and family aspirations, lower expectations and lower educational performance (Perry & McConney, 2010), and this is true across international contexts (including the US, England, Sweden, and New Zealand).



Allocate school funding on the basis of equity

In recent years there has been clear recognition that Australia's funding of schools has been inequitable, complex and not targeted to the areas of most need. The 2011 Gonski Report into school funding in Australia concluded that "the key to improving equity in schooling therefore lies not only in an increased investment in disadvantaged schools and students, but also in ensuring additional resources are used to employ strategies in a comprehensive, integrated and sustainable manner" (DEEWR, 2011, p. 109). Australia spends less than the OECD average in terms of public funding of education and Australian families spend more than average on private education, or on parent contributions to government schools (OECD, 2016). Australia also offers more government funding to private schools than many other countries (Hanrahan, 2018). This means Australia's public expenditure on education lags behind other countries, and poorer results for disadvantaged families and groups who cannot afford to pay extra for improved educational opportunities.

Governments should move away from targeted programs to address single aspects of equity and instead ensure that the states and territories have substantive recurrent base funding with additional funding to supplement the needs of disadvantaged students. This funding needs to be comprehensive and transparent rather than based on a single factor such as standardised test scores.



Prioritise school leaders "leading for equity"

Research into leadership and equity/social justice reveals that school leaders must have an explicit focus on these issues for schools to be more socially just. It is not just the responsibility of school leaders in disadvantaged areas to address these issues; it needs to be a focus for all schools (Niesche, 2017; Salwell, 2013; Connell, 1993). This requires an understanding and acknowledgement that schools can be sites of injustice (Brooks, 2012).

Leadership for social justice and equity is about challenging issues that disadvantage certain students and seeking out approaches to alleviate poverty, racism and other forms of disadvantage and inequity. Sometimes these cannot be measured quantitatively but this does not mean they are not valuable.

A 'socially just school' (Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2014) improves the outcomes of students from disadvantaged backgrounds through addressing issues around school culture, school/community relations, socially critical pedagogy, curriculum and leadership. These ideas are focused on speaking back to deficit discourses of students, addressing disengagement from schooling, giving students voice and agency, having high expectations of students, embracing diversity and tackling myths and stereotypes around disadvantage.



Implement culturally responsive changes to the education system; create meaningful community-school relationships and partnerships

Research now recognises the significance of culturally responsive curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in supporting learning outcomes for disadvantaged students (Bishop, 2003; Keddie, 2012; Klenowski, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Gillborn, 2004). Valuing marginalised students' culture is particularly important in disrupting the mainstream exclusionary and discriminatory practices that tend to undermine these students' performance. Unfortunately, attempts at valuing marginalised cultures in schools often deploy superficial and tokenistic means – as in one-off celebrations such as multicultural days – which can lead to a further "othering" of these students. Schools must move beyond such superficial understandings through a more critical approach to culture, in which educators engage contextually with marginalised knowledge and experiences toward creating more meaningful and relevant learning encounters for all students (Keddie, Gowlett, Mills, Monk, & Renshaw, 2013; Nakata, 2007). There is a particular need for effective collaboration with Indigenous peoples in decision-making that affects them (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2007, p. 241).



What do we still need to learn?

To achieve greater equity in Australian education, the Gonski Institute for Education prioritises research and stakeholder engagement to better inform policy-making decisions. We know further research and evidence-based solutions are needed to:

- get (and keep) the right teachers in the right schools
- achieve parity of participation in quality early childhood education for all groups
- better understand how outside-the-school-gate factors impact students' educational success, and harness the strengths of "disadvantaged" communities to implement more culturally-responsive systems
- prepare and develop school leaders to lead for equity in their own contexts
- understand the most equitable models for school funding and the best mechanisms for reducing inequality
- alleviate the negative effects of school choice policies in concentrating disadvantage

Recommendations for achieving greater equity in Australian education:

- 1 Equity must be defined in terms of social justice, and must mean more than just something measured with standardised tests.
 - 2 Government schools need comprehensive and transparent base funding targeted to areas of greatest disadvantage and student need, with responsive accountability systems.
 - 3 School leadership development and capacity building must explicitly focus on issues of equity and social justice as fundamental to the work of all school leaders (at all levels, in all schools).
 - 4 Schools must employ culturally responsive programs and strategies that target issues faced by marginalised groups based on identified good practice.
 - 5 Community-based initiatives that foster positive and mutually beneficial school-community relations are integral to addressing equity. Working with Indigenous communities is essential in developing any policy or program.
 - 6 School choice policies have failed disadvantaged communities and resulted in segregation and greater inequality, and thus need to be carefully reconsidered.
 - 7 Research and policy change must be targeted toward improving educational opportunity for rural and remote students and schools, taking a holistic view that includes education, resourcing, and health and wellbeing outcomes.
 - 8 The system must get better at keeping high quality teachers in 'hard to staff' areas and areas of concentrated disadvantage. Attracting experienced teachers and leaders who value and prioritise equity is important for disadvantaged schools to succeed. Including the voices of the teaching workforce is essential to this effort.
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