EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION:

Creating a system that is fair and inclusive for all

Education inequity is a problem in Australia. We need to re-think what counts as 'success'.

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STUDENTS HAVE NO CONTROL OVER EDUCATION EQUITY WHICH IS LARGELY DETERMINED BY SOCIETAL AND STRUCTURAL ISSUES

Globally, Australia ranks in the bottom third of OECD countries for equitable access to education. Postcodes, family background and parent income levels are persistent determinants of student success and their destiny in lives.

Student groups who are likely to experience educational inequity include First Nations people, refugees or migrants from a non-English speaking background, people with a disability, or those who live in rural and regional areas. Being part of multiple groups only increases the chances of inequity – a refugee student living in a regional community is at a greater risk of poorer educational outcomes.

Widening disparities compromise future life chances and exacerbate the gaps between rich and poor. Currently, growing educational inequity is costing Australia around $20.3 billion, equivalent to 1.2% of GDP.

Social, health and environmental disruptions also have an inequitable impact on education access. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, successive environmental crises and the economic downturn have worsened existing inequities for disadvantaged students.

The impact of these events has been acutely felt by communities, schools and students living in rural and regional areas. Issues such as digital poverty, fewer learning resources, school staff shortages, lost or reduced household income and stressful home environments have resulted in lost learning opportunities causing the inequity gap to widen further over the past two years.

Early childhood care is also currently not affordable for many Australians. An estimated 39% of Australian families cannot afford early childhood care, especially families with lower household incomes. This prevents early identification and response for children who may require more support to be school-ready. Not receiving this support early on can have knock-on effects for education, health and wellbeing outcomes in their future.

Education resourcing is currently strongly determined by wealth. Wealthy students usually live closer to well-funded schools (mainly Independent and some Catholic schools) and less privileged students are clustered around poorly-funded schools (mainly government funded). This means students do not have the same opportunities for learning, and education outcomes vary widely between schools.

Family income does not automatically create poorer education outcomes, but instead speaks to the opportunity available for parents and students to access and participate in education. While parents and families from low socio-economic backgrounds reportedly engage far less actively as partners of learning, education systems currently do not support diverse approaches to parent engagement in student learning. Importantly, the education system is not structured in a way that allows students to be key drivers of their learning process, with the voices of disadvantaged students largely absent from education discussions.

What happens at school can impact how well students learn. Students who experience bullying, racism and other exclusionary practices in school are less able to engage, study and stay mentally well. The ongoing stresses and responses to the COVID-19 and climate crisis has also brought the mental health and wellbeing needs of educators, students and their communities to the forefront. A burnt out and anxious classroom cannot learn effectively, but this risk is currently not being addressed effectively or sustainably.

Current ways of measuring education 'success' – and how schools are rewarded for delivering on these benchmarks – creates further inequity. Standard curriculums and testing do not capture the skills and capabilities that are developed outside of formal education settings.

The way that standardised measures (such as NAPLAN) are collected and used to determine achievement is discriminatory towards First Nations or non-English speaking students, classifying them as disadvantaged against a Western developed concept of success in education.

EDUCATION INEQUITY IS A SYMPTOM OF BROADER SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Education inequity does not exist on its own, but is linked with other 'wicked' social problems like poverty and homelessness. Addressing education inequity – when there are limited resources to address complex social problems - requires system-wide change, including a commitment to invest in inclusive programs and people, and creating shared responsibility between stakeholder groups, including parents, carers, and communities.

To achieve equity, students must receive quality educational opportunities regardless of their background. Student strengths and knowledge gained outside schools can be better integrated into the curriculum and assessment.

Learning that is intentionally inclusive and contextualised to support individual students' needs and circumstances will also likely yield the best educational and broader social outcomes.

There are already programs that yield positive outcomes. Examples include:

- Australian students are being given opportunities to engage with and deepen their knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures through their inclusion in the Australian curriculum.

- Some state governments and local agencies have established tutoring programs and provided individual assistance to help disadvantaged students catch up on lost learning as a result of the 2020 and 2021 lockdowns. COVID-19 was also a wake-up call to address long-standing unresolved issues, such as digital access and inclusion.

- Initiatives such as the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth's 'Nest' is an evidence-based wellbeing framework that helps promote holistic, inclusive and shared ways of understanding wellbeing for specific equity groups.

- Programs that improve students' understandings of themselves as learners, with an increased sense of connection and belonging, have strong potential.

Elections offer an ideal time to increase the visibility of the work already being done in the social purpose sector to address education inequity and identify specific targeted policy responses. There are a growing number of in-school interventions that support students to broaden their skills and aspirations. These programs should be supported with funding so they can be delivered well, but also need to be carefully evaluated to determine their impact on closing the inequity gap in school completion and post-school pathways.

A primary challenge before being able to address education inequities is to acknowledge the dominance of Western influence and deficit discourses in mainstream education. There needs to be support for organisations who are working to build conditions for re-regulation and reform, such as creating non-traditional education models that go beyond ATAR.

WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN?

Despite multiple state and federal reviews, senate inquiries and reforms, Australia has made little movement in improving the educational inequity gap.

Young people are being asked to be adaptable and expected to possess a broad set of capability and employability skills and be able to apply their knowledge in evolving and diverse circumstances. Without addressing education inequity, young people and their achievements may be viewed as a failure – rather than seeing a failure in systems that help or hinder their development.

Funding and capability support are some of the key issues for these system failures.

Schools in low socio-economic or regional and remote areas are poorly funded and under-resourced, suffer staff shortages, and generally lack a proper network of services to support their students' needs and tertiary aspirations.

There is a persistent shortage of teachers and staff in disadvantaged schools. Australia has the largest gap within OECD countries in teacher shortages between advantaged and disadvantaged schools, and metropolitan versus non-metropolitan schools.

Training does not prepare teachers to ensure their practices are inclusive and responsive to student or location diversity. Criticism of the teaching profession distracts attention from wider systemic and structural problems.

To increase education engagement, students from diverse backgrounds should be supported in taking ownership of their learning and future. An understanding of learning and capacity building activities outside of the classroom, with support from family and communities, also provide opportunities for education success.

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Governments need to commit to investing in free or highly subsidised, accessible and quality early childhood care.

Policymakers need to be bold in shifting understandings of success in education. Departments can and should partner with stakeholders from diverse communities to develop non-ATAR based learning pathways, and put systematic processes in place to document skills and competencies acquired outside of education settings.

Programs that receive funding to improve education equity must also be sustainably supported to conduct high-quality evaluation and scale-up where appropriate.

Governments must do more to support staff and teacher wellbeing in low socio-economic and disadvantaged schools. Investment in staff cultural competence training, and funds to attract and retain high-quality educators is crucial. Support should also be provided to schools to help students build and retain resilience, and social and emotional skills as part of their learning.

It is time for Australia to take education equity seriously. We need to think and act boldly to ensure we adopt a fair and inclusive system for all.

CSI RESOURCES/REPORTS

· Amplify Insights: Education inequity
· Couch Surfing Students: The Yarra Ranges Youth Homelessness Prevention Project
· Teacher wellbeing and COVID-19

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