

ISSUE ANALYSIS

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Educating the Disadvantaged

Contributors: Jennifer Buckingham, John Fleming, Jean Illingworth, Professor Chris Goddard.

No. 116 • 1 October 2009

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Educating the Disadvantaged

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- National testing has revealed that somewhere between one in five and one in six Australian children is, at best, barely literate and numerate. These children are not evenly distributed across the population. They are concentrated in particular schools and in particular areas of the country.
- Children with the highest rates of educational failure are children in jobless households, Indigenous children, and children living in remote communities.
- Although there is an undeniable relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and low academic performance, it is not inevitable. International research on effective schools and case studies in Australia demonstrate that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are capable of high levels of school performance, given the right educational conditions.
- The stories of three very different schools in widely disparate parts of the country show that the recipe for success does not involve major capital works and new technologies, smaller classes, or increased spending on special programs. It lies in research-based teaching methods, performance-based accountability, and a school culture conducive to learning.
- Melbourne educator John Fleming has made this work in practice, transforming one of the most disadvantaged public schools into Australia from a chronically failing school into one of the best performing schools in Victoria. He oversaw a similar improvement in results in one of the wealthiest schools in Australia using the same methods.
- The largely Indigenous Djarragun College in Far North Queensland has applied the same lessons with outstanding results. But as principal Jean Illingworth reveals, despite the heroic efforts of teachers, Djarragun College is fighting an unrelenting battle against government welfare policies that undermine its work.
- Jean Illingworth describes payments to Indigenous youth through ABSTUDY when they turn 16 as a 'sort of warped rite of passage.' She says that these unconditional payments, intended to help students stay in school, are instead being spent on substance abuse, and the school is helpless to prevent the slide of once-promising students into crime, violence and incarceration.
- There is a group of forgotten children among the most educationally disadvantaged—neglected and abused children who have been, or should be, removed from their families. Professor Chris Goddard explains that unlike low SES and Indigenous children, there is no national data on the 30,000 children who are in foster care each day. Although it is known that these children have very poor educational outcomes due to personal trauma and frequent school changes, they do not receive the attention they need.
- New performance reporting and accountability measures introduced by the Australian government will reveal numerous failing schools. The government has promised extra resources for these schools but has not elucidated how long failure will be tolerated and what the long-term strategy might be.
- CIS research fellow Jennifer Buckingham argues that where public schools have consistently failed, state governments should be more open to non-government providers, following the public charter school model in the United States. Although not all charter schools have been successful, there is an identifiable subset of schools that have been a god-send for thousands of poor and minority students.

Introduction

Jennifer Buckingham

This publication arises from the education session of the Centre for Independent Studies' (CIS) annual conference in August this year. It is rare for the conference proceedings to be published, but on this occasion many participants expressed the opinion that the powerful presentations should have a wider audience. The speakers generously agreed to allow publication.

The theme of the papers is educating the disadvantaged. In the first paper, I outline the scale of educational disadvantage in Australia—the number of children who are failing to achieve the minimum expected levels of literacy and numeracy, the reasons for this failure, and which children are most likely to fail.

Educational disadvantage is not spread evenly across the population. According to national benchmarks, Indigenous children, children whose parents are unemployed, and children who live in remote areas are six times more likely to be illiterate and innumerate than non-Indigenous children, children with an employed parent, and city-dwellers. The children who are failing to reach the benchmarks are not found in equal proportions in every school. Disadvantage is concentrated in particular schools and in particular areas.

The relationship between socio-economic status and school performance is not perfect. As the late, great Professor Ken Rowe made abundantly clear, family background may establish where children start in life, but it doesn't necessarily determine where they end up. Yet, there are too many schools where educational failure is expected and accepted as a product of social disadvantage.

Aristotle said one can demonstrate the possible by studying the actual. If we accept this maxim, the paper by Melbourne educator John Fleming demonstrates that given the opportunity, all children can succeed in education no matter where they come from.

Fleming details the transformation of a chronically under-achieving school into one of the best performing schools in Victoria over the course of 10 years. Bellfield Primary School, where Fleming was principal from 1996 to 2005, was then and still is one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged metropolitan schools in Australia. Tests in 1996 and 1997 revealed that the students were, in Fleming's words, 'dismally failing' in literacy and numeracy. By 2005, Bellfield's students were at the top of the state-wide tests.

These extraordinary results were not achieved through increased spending. There was no reduction in class sizes. There was no increase in teacher pay. There were no major capital works or new technologies. Fleming attributes the school's success to three changes in school policy: implementing a research-based pedagogy; introducing performance-based accountability for students and teachers; and changing the school culture to reflect traditional values and discipline.

In 2006, Fleming moved on to Haileybury College, a high-fee independent school. Despite the fact that the students at Haileybury had all the advantages of expensive school facilities and academically favourable home lives, they were being out-performed by the students at Bellfield. Fleming applied the same changes at Haileybury as he had at Bellfield, with the same turnaround in results.

The Bellfield-Haileybury story shows that children in disadvantaged circumstances don't need 'special' educational programs designed for under-privileged children, and that more financial resources don't guarantee a top-notch education. The moral of the story is that all children from all backgrounds in all schools need pretty much the same thing: a strong curriculum delivered by good teachers who are held to high standards and who, in turn, have high expectations of students.

This recipe has also been applied to good effect at a school that is a long way from Melbourne, both geographically and demographically. Djarragun College is in Gordonvale, south of Cairns in far north Queensland. Its students are predominantly from Indigenous families from Cape York and the Torres Strait. Djarragun is an independent school but charges only nominal fees in the order of \$30 a fortnight.

The children who are failing to reach the benchmarks are not found in equal proportions in every school.

Jean Illingworth has been principal of Djarragun College since 2001. She too has overseen a transformation of the school from a run-down, failing school with low attendance to a beautifully maintained, high functioning school described by Indigenous leader Noel Pearson as the ‘happiest place he has ever been.’ In her paper, Illingworth credits the success of the school to dedicated teachers and a policy of ‘tough love.’

Although the Djarragun story is similar to the Bellfield story in many ways, it is less hopeful. Achieving success at Djarragun is an unrelenting battle, not because the school’s strategy is ineffective, or because the students are beyond help, but because government policies actively undermine the school’s work.

Illingworth’s testimony on the despair of witnessing promising young students embark on a path of alcohol and drug use and eventually crime and violence is confronting. She blames this tragedy on ABSTUDY payments, which are provided unconditionally to students when they turn 16—the age when schools lose their authority.

Although the plight of Indigenous children in education has been well known for a long time, the increased availability and quality of statistics over the last few years have revealed the extent of their disadvantage and has encouraged action. Likewise, the impact of socio-economic status on schooling has been the subject of thousands of studies.

The final paper in this collection reveals the forgotten children in education—children who are victims of abuse or neglect. Chris Goddard, who has devoted his professional life to child protection, explains that we do not even know just how educationally disadvantaged these children are because there are no national or even state-wide statistics about their school attendance, performance, or completion rates.

Research studies show that children in dysfunctional families have high rates of school absenteeism and mobility. Similarly, children who move in and out of foster care also have high rates of mobility and can attend numerous schools in a year. This obviously affects their learning, but record-keeping and tracking of these students is sporadic. Too often, the children most in need of care and protection are overlooked by the systems and people meant to provide it. Goddard calls this ‘inverse child care law.’

These papers and the stories they tell are not merely illustrative; they are also instructive. The policy lessons are straightforward.

Autonomy with accountability

The successes at Bellfield Primary School and Djarragun College were driven by visionary and committed school leaders. As a principal in the Victorian government system, John Fleming enjoyed many of the freedoms available to independent schools like Djarragun College—the freedom to select staff, use the school budget wisely, and make decisions about school governance. Unfortunately, this is not a common situation across Australia. Many public schools are forced to operate within the strictures of the highly centralised state government bureaucracies. The operation of public schools is tightly regulated and controlled, but accountability for outcomes is loosely defined and benchmark standards are often low.

This equation is precisely the wrong way around. International research, including work by the OECD and Australian researchers at Educational Transformations, shows that effective schools have a high level of autonomy within a framework of accountability.¹ This doesn’t mean giving schools licence to do whatever they want, regardless of the outcomes for students. It means giving schools the freedom to choose the best methods of educating their students and holding them responsible for the results they achieve.

No escape clauses

With good teaching and a school environment conducive to learning, almost all students can achieve academic standards that surpass the current minimum benchmarks. Every child’s education is important and should be monitored. In most families, parents will ensure their children are getting the attention they deserve. Children without such parental care and interest should not be allowed to fly under the radar.

Many public schools are forced to operate within the strictures of the highly centralised state government bureaucracies.

Improve teacher training

It is striking that both John Fleming and Jean Illingworth said that after four years of study, including at least one year of teacher education, new graduates still had to be taught how to teach. Extensive reviews of teacher education over the last decade have found that teacher education degrees and diplomas are not producing graduates with the right skills and abilities. If universities are unwilling and unable to change, alternative ways of training teachers need to be seriously considered, including school-based training.

Open the doors to different providers

Allowing alternative approaches when current ways don't work is the final policy lesson. The release of school-level performance information by the federal government later this year will expose what many of us know to be true, that numerous schools throughout this country are failing their students. The data will be disputed and lots of excuses will be made, but some schools will be unable to satisfactorily explain their poor performance.

The federal government has said that it will use the data to target support and additional resources to these schools. But there has been no announcement about the measures that will be taken if a school does not eventually lift its game. What should be the consequences for consistently low quality schools and their governing authorities?

State and territory governments range from reluctant to belligerent when it comes to their relationship with non-government school providers. Some governments are cooperative with the non-government school sector but do not wish to be seen as abetting them. Others are defensive and fight against any attempt by the non-government sector to establish new schools in areas where they are needed, even when the government's commitment to education in those areas is half-hearted and undeniably substandard.

It is possible for some schools to succeed where others have failed. Charter schools in the United States operating either as new managers of existing schools or as brand new schools are achieving great results with children in the most disadvantaged circumstances. Not all charter schools are reaching these heights, but a growing and identifiable sub-set of schools are providing a model of schooling that is closing, and sometimes reversing, the achievement gap for minority students and the poor.

State and territory governments must become more open to the possibility of allowing more choice and freedom, both within and outside the government system. The conditions must be created whereby school leaders can truly lead and innovation can occur. There will be risks in such an educational environment, but the protective forces of choice and accountability will ensure that any failures will be apparent and not be allowed to persist indefinitely.

For many students, social disadvantage is being translated ineluctably into educational disadvantage year after year. The following papers show that that need not be the case.

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The scale and nature of educational disadvantage and resolving it

Jennifer Buckingham

Australia's 'long tail of underachievement' has been talked about so often by so many that it is almost a cliché, but it is not entirely accurate. According to international studies like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) educational assessment program, Australia's group of low-performing students is larger than some other developed countries such as Finland, Japan and Canada but smaller than the OECD average.²

Australia's group of low performers might not be large by international standards, but the figures from our own national testing program are more revealing and more damning. The following statistics are taken from the 2008 Australian literacy and numeracy test results.^{3,4}

Nationally, 6% of Year 3 students failed to reach the minimum reading literacy standards and 3.3% failed to meet the minimum numeracy standards. That is, they did not demonstrate the most basic elements of literacy and numeracy for their year level. A further 12% just met the minimum standard.

The Year 3 figures are broadly representative. If anything, they are at the better end of the range of outcomes rather than overstating the case. Similar proportions of students performed below the expected standard in Years 5, 7 and 9. Somewhere between one in five and one in six Australian school students is, at best, barely literate and numerate.

The national average is troubling but doesn't inform which children are in the low performance category. The NAPLAN results also show that:

- Children whose parents did not finish school, or whose parents were long-term jobless, were around six times more likely to fall below the minimum benchmark the tests than children who had an employed parent with a university degree.
- Indigenous children were six times more likely to fall below the minimum benchmarks than non-Indigenous children.
- Children living in remote areas were five times more likely than children in metro areas to fail to reach the benchmark, while the failure rate for children in very remote areas was 10 times higher.

When you put these factors together and get an Indigenous child living in a very remote part of Australia, the failure rate is enormous. Almost 70% of those children did not meet the minimum literacy standards. That's bad enough, but the failure rate for Indigenous children in very remote communities in the Northern Territory was 86%. Another 10% just achieved the basic level. Studies conducted in individual communities have found 100% failure rates in those communities, indicating that the national test results are perhaps optimistic.⁵

The challenge for educators and policymakers is not to discover what works in schools to raise academic performance among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This body of knowledge is fairly well established.

A great deal of the research evidence on educating disadvantaged children comes from the United States and particularly from empirical research and in-depth case studies of charter schools.

Charter schools are independently governed public schools. They cannot charge fees and have to adhere to public school obligations such as open enrolment. They are run by non-profit or profit-making organisations as networks of schools or by community groups as stand-alone schools.

In exchange for public funding, which is usually close to the equivalent of per student funding in public schools, the school enters into a charter or contract with the charter school authority in its state.

The reason charter schools are of interest is because unlike private schools, which have to charge fees to make up for funding shortfalls, charter schools have high proportions of poor and minority students.

Somewhere between one in five and one in six Australian school students is, at best, barely literate and numerate.

Of course, there are some spectacular success stories in both public and non-government schools in Australia. Unfortunately, so little information is available about schools in this country that it is difficult to find and study the successes. Thanks to the wealth of school-level data available to researchers and the public in the United States, the outcomes of charter schools have been heavily analysed. These analyses have found that charter schools are variable in quality. Some are outstanding, while others are no better than neighbouring public schools.⁶

The issue of bad charter schools is an important one, but this paper concentrates on the lessons learned from the very, very good ones, the ‘gap-closing’ charter schools. These schools have been a god-send for disadvantaged students, achieving performance levels among poor and minority students that rival and sometimes exceed their more advantaged peers. Fittingly, the successful school models have expanded and replicated the most rapidly.

Here are just a few examples.

In **KIPP schools**, 80% of children are low income and 90% are African-American or Latino. A recent study found that students who have completed four years at a KIPP middle school (Grades 5–8) moved from the 40th to the 80th percentile in maths and from the 30th to the 60th percentile in reading. More than 80% of KIPP graduates have gone to college, four times the rate of their counterparts in public schools.⁷

The **Promise Academy charter schools in Harlem** take their students from one of the most impoverished areas in the United States. Research published this year shows these schools reversed the black-white achievement gap in maths and almost closed the gap in reading.⁸

The **Amistad Academy in New Haven**, Connecticut, also predominantly enrolls children whose families are below the poverty line. The school’s students consistently beat the state-wide average test scores in reading, writing and maths, and have outperformed students in surrounding affluent districts for years.⁹

In **Albany, New York**, charter schools achieved higher pass rates on the 2009 New York state exams than almost all of the Albany public schools. The charter schools have much higher proportions of black and poor students than the average public school.¹⁰

These successes didn’t happen by accident; there is a recipe. Gap-closing schools have a number of common features, collectively called the ‘No Excuses’ model.¹¹ They can be broadly summarised into three categories.

First: governance. Principals have autonomy in staffing and managing their school’s finances but they are also responsible for the school’s performance. There is a relentless focus on accountability and results. Parents are treated as partners and have to make a written commitment to do what is necessary for their children to learn.

Second: teachers. Teacher recruitment is highly selective; most are drawn from the top ranks of elite universities. They are paid a relatively high salary but forgo tenure and are not unionised. Teachers have a very heavy workload and a high level of responsibility and accountability.

Third: the classroom. Students have longer school days (usually 8am to 5pm) and a longer school year, often with Saturday classes and summer school.

Unfortunately, so little information is available about schools in this country that it is difficult to find and study the rare successes.

The curriculum is rigorous and highly structured; there is regular testing and strong discipline. There are high expectations of all students in achievement and behaviour. Interestingly, computers and other technologies play a minor role.

Furthermore, they are schools of choice. Students, parents, teachers, and principals all voluntarily make a commitment to the school and its mission.

So, we know what works. The challenge is in taking these lessons and applying them widely in an education policy environment where governments stymie school-driven innovation and improvement. The majority of our most disadvantaged children languish in public schools where, unless they are lucky enough to get strong, focused leaders who forcefully resist the status quo and are able to take teachers along with them, educational success is elusive. Even then, principals are hamstrung by regulations on staffing, layers of bureaucracy, and lack of flexibility in deploying their resources.

To make matters worse, state and territory governments that have demonstrably failed in their duty to properly educate students often refuse to get out of the way and let someone else have a go.

Independent schools provide an alternative in many places, but they have to first establish themselves as separate entities and draw students away from public schools to be viable. This is risky for the governing organisation and requires a lot of financial and human capital—sometimes resulting in large infrastructure expenditure in one school and empty buildings in another. New independent schools often face enormous resistance from educational authorities.

Charter schools offer another possibility. A charter organisation could either assume control of a whole school or perhaps just part of the school. This is exactly what Green Dot does in Los Angeles. It takes over failing public schools and transforms them into clusters of smaller, autonomous schools, all of which follow a tried and tested model.¹²

Creating this possibility in Australia requires little more than political will. We don't even need to wait for a voucher system. All that is needed is for state governments to create charter legislation that allows competing non-government entities to take over management of existing public schools. Alternatively, public schools could themselves decide to become self-governing organisations.

Charter schools extend choice to more families. Choice allows schools to develop and try new ways of doing things. The successful experiments flourish and the failures provide a lesson in what not to do. The No Excuses model is not the final word in education and won't suit every school or every child, but it has emerged and been replicated through the marketplace—other successful models will too, given the chance.

This is necessary not just for the children who are at the low end of the achievement scale but also for those at the top.

It is important to acknowledge that our quest to improve education for low-performing children has created an imbalance and we are at risk of trading quality for equality.

In the first phase of the OECD's literacy tests in 2000, Australia was found to be a high quality, low equity country. That is, although our average scores were among the highest in the OECD, we had a larger-than-average gap in performance between our best and worst students. This gap was strongly correlated with socio-economic status.¹³

By the 2006 phase of the tests, things had changed. We are now considered to be a high quality, high equality country. This is not cause for celebration, however. Our low achievement group in 2006 was as large and performed as badly as it had in 2000. But our top students had performed significantly worse.¹⁴ So yes, the gap had narrowed but not in the way it was supposed to. Instead of pulling the bottom group up, we had pulled the top group down.

This top group is also comparatively small. In another set of international tests, TIMSS 2007, just 6% of Australian students achieved the advanced benchmark in Year 8 maths compared with 45% of children in Chinese Taipei.¹⁵

New independent schools often face enormous resistance from educational authorities.

There is a great challenge here. We need to better educate the very clever students because they are likely to be the future leaders our country, not just in government but in medicine, law, science, business, education, and community organisations, to name a few.

Neglect of our brightest children begins at kindergarten and endures all the way through school life in many cases. Gifted and talented programs receive a fraction of the attention and resources that are directed to remedial programs.

The needs of bright students and the needs of socio-economically disadvantaged students are not competing priorities. Although there is a strong correlation between socio-economic disadvantage and low performance, it is not a perfect relationship. There are poor children who are very bright and there are well-off children who struggle academically. Both are disadvantaged in an inflexible school system that fails to cater for their needs.

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The Bellfield-Haileybury Story

John Fleming

In the education community, some of my views about what is needed in schools are considered controversial. However, a lot of it is common sense. Two thoughts have guided me as a school leader and in education. First, every child matters every day. Second, all students can be high achievers unless they have some significant disability. But that's not happening in our schools.

Bellfield Primary School

Bellfield Primary School is in the northern suburbs of metropolitan Melbourne. It is an incredibly disadvantaged school—one of the most disadvantaged schools in metropolitan Australia. In 2005, my last year there, 87% of children at the school were eligible for the Educational Maintenance Allowance. That means 87% of the parents were unemployed. Sixty-one percent of the students were from single-parent families, predominantly living with their mother.

Just over 25% of the students were non-English speaking students. Most of those students were from Somalia, had lived in refugee camps and arrived here on boats—and had never spoken English. Just over 10% of the students were Indigenous. So we had students from just about every socially and economically disadvantaged cohort.

I was appointed to Bellfield in 1992 as assistant principal and became principal in 1996, which was about the same time the Victorian government introduced a scheme of school reviews to measure student performance. According to this scheme, well over 80% of Bellfield students were not only failing in literacy and numeracy but failing dismally—not even close to the benchmarks.

By 2005, tests indicated that the Bellfield students, as a cohort and as a group, were at the top of state-wide benchmarks. So in that 10-year period, something had significantly transformed the educational opportunities of those students.

The data is illustrative. An Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) test, the Reading Progress Test, measures every student's ability to read against their chronological age. A score of 100 means students are reading at chronological age.

In 1997, we benchmarked every student in the school, every grade in the school, and the whole school—the overall school score was 92.7. Given that the benchmark was 100, the students were failing dismally.

Over the next few years, we increased that score significantly to 98.7 in 2000, 106 in 2001, 111 in 2003, 116 in 2004, and 120 in 2005. The students were significantly ahead of where they needed to be, and indeed further ahead of the expected performance in 2005 than they had been behind in 1997.

Another statistic comes from government testing. In Year 1, all schools had to test their students in terms of their reading ability. In 1998, 34.6% of Bellfield students were at the benchmark level 15. This increased to 100% in 2003, comparing favourably to 23.6% in 'like schools'—other schools that had similar cohorts of students. State-wide, 35.9% of Year 1 students reached benchmark level. This data is only available up to 2003 because once I started releasing this damning information at conferences, the Victorian government, in its wisdom, decided not to release it any more.

During my years at Bellfield, learning outcomes improved even when the level of economic disadvantage actually increased. There were more students from single-parent families, there were more refugee children, there were more Koori children, and there were more unemployed parents.

The transformation was because of changes in three areas: pedagogy, school culture, and accountability.

Pedagogy

Pedagogy means the way teachers deliver the curriculum. Governments in Australia have a belief about how curriculum should be delivered, but it's not based on research. And the research is incredibly clear, from all countries.

Research from around the world, including the National Reading Panel in the United States in 2000;¹⁶ the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy here in 2005;¹⁷ and the Rose review in the United Kingdom in 2006,¹⁸ quite clearly states that students must be taught phonics in a sequential and ongoing manner, and the lessons must be reinforced. Phonics is letter-sound relationships. C-A-T says cat. Most schools in Australia purport to teach it, but they don't or teach it incidentally. It's hard to believe that it's gone out of education but it has.

At Bellfield, we changed the pedagogy to reflect the research, introducing teacher-directed learning and explicit instruction, which takes students step by step through whatever concept they are learning. Many people would think explicit instruction would be standard practice in schools but I assure you it's not, particularly in reading.

Culture

Culture in schools is about generating values for students. It's about building bridges with every child. Every time you deal with a misbehaving student, ask yourself if you are building bridges or knocking them down. People who have worked in tough schools know that once the bridges have been knocked down, you are never getting back those children.

It is important to understand that Bellfield was a tough community. The murder of one of our parents was depicted in the TV series *Underbelly*. At an Easter hat parade in front of 250 children, one of our mothers had a disagreement with another mother and head-butted her unconscious in front of all the kids.

Did the children bat an eyelid? No, they had seen this sort of violence many times before. The Easter hat parade continued as normal while I explained to the two parents why their behaviour wasn't appropriate, especially in front of the children.

Another incident, among many, was when I heard yelling and screaming coming from the school canteen as parents prepared lunch. I walked in to find two mothers fighting with knives. I managed to get the knives away from them, but then they started kicking and punching each other.

That was our community. The children were aggressive. Parents taught them to solve issues by punching somebody rather than negotiating. Drugs, alcohol and gambling were enormous problems. Parents couldn't control or organise their own lives, let alone their children's lives.

We brought in traditional values that had gone out of schools, certainly in Victoria. We raised the flag every day. We had a Monday morning assembly where we saluted the flag and sang the national anthem. We tried to teach students respect, not only for themselves but for each other, their community, and for the nation.

Discipline became an important part of the school culture. The tighter the boundaries for any student, the better they behave. Lee Canter developed a program in the 1980s called Assertive Discipline.¹⁹ Canter does not say you can forcibly assert your discipline or your authority over students. He says that every student can behave given the right parameters. And I have no doubt that is true. Cantor's approach has been totally misrepresented and misinterpreted and this happens so much with educational practice.

Accountability

The third area of significant change at Bellfield was accountability. Teaching is the least accountable profession I know. Maybe teaching shouldn't be categorised as a profession considering schools don't properly use research, empirical evidence or data. The figures quite clearly show that lots of students are starting to fail early in their educational career. And we let them get away with it. We let the system as a whole allow students not to succeed. And that's just not good enough.

Many people would think explicit instruction would be standard practice in schools but I assure you it's not, particularly in reading.

At Bellfield, I decided to measure student performance year by year. Data became the basis of teacher performance management. Students were tested regularly to ensure they were improving and meeting our minimum benchmarks at each year level. Teachers were expected help their students attain that minimum level. And the benchmarks were rigorous. For instance, the state-wide benchmark for prep was level 1. Ours was level 5.

It all came down to expectations—expectations of the teachers who then apply the expectations to the students themselves.

Haileybury College

When I got to Haileybury College in 2006, the students were working above state-wide benchmarks, but they were not as good as the students at Bellfield. I introduced the same pedagogy and the same culture. Admittedly, the culture at Haileybury was not as difficult as in Bellfield. Students came to school wanting to learn and achieve, and their parents set high expectations for them. Students knew their parents were paying a lot of money to send them to the school, so that was also a factor for its better performance.

But there was no accountability of teacher performance, so we introduced it. Teacher accountability is now about measuring student performance.

The result has been the same as at Bellfield. Student achievement at Haileybury has improved significantly in three years. It was, without a doubt, easier at Haileybury because the school has good children who behave and when the bell goes at the end of the day, they go to good families.

Parents

It has to be acknowledged that at schools like Bellfield, the families are not unsupportive but may be incapable of support. Half the parents could not read, so they couldn't help their children at home. But once we made people aware of the data and the success of the school, I had parents in my office crying, saying: 'I'm so pleased for my boy. I'm a failure in my life and I'll admit that, but I want my child to succeed. I desperately want my child to be a doctor or a lawyer or whatever.'

Traditionally, it's believed that parents in disadvantaged communities don't have aspirations for their children but I guarantee you they do. Parents who see their child succeeding, working above expectations, and performing well at school will adjust their expectations so their child can succeed. And that's exactly what the Bellfield parents did.

That in itself is really a valuable thing to know—that these communities do want to make a difference for their children if given the opportunity.

Conclusion

I'm often asked about the differences between the two school systems. In my experience, there is no difference in teacher quality between government and private schools, in the pedagogy or the delivery of curriculum. In general, private schools are just as much to blame for not implementing the right curriculum delivery as are government schools.

As principal at Bellfield, I mostly recruited graduates because they didn't come with preconceived ideas about what the students could achieve. We developed a coaching program where we taught new teachers how to teach explicitly. A lot of the graduates didn't know grammar or have the necessary skills because they had come through the immersion-based teaching programs.

They didn't know how to teach effectively because our teacher training institutions are still disseminating pedagogy that's not based on research. Teachers come out of teachers' college into schools where we have to retrain them. Every graduate we took on at Bellfield and Haileybury has turned into an outstanding teacher. There could be more such teachers if we could get the pedagogy right in our teacher training institutions.

In terms of resourcing, as principal at Bellfield Primary School, I had the teaching ratios that I wanted, the teachers I wanted, and the resources I needed. It wasn't about throwing money at the issue. It might be different in other schools, but certainly in our

Parents who see their child succeeding, working above expectations, and performing well at school will adjust their expectations so their child can succeed.

school we had the resources we needed. Too often, I hear principals say ‘give me more resources and I’ll make a difference.’ Bellfield made a difference with the resources it had and they were sufficient.

At times, our leaders in schools simply don’t show enough initiative. Our bureaucracies and the decision-makers in education need to develop and promote a simple recipe for success, and it’s not difficult. The research is there, the successful schools are there. We need to translate those successes to schools across the country because the education system is failing a lot of children.

**At times,
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The Djarragun Story

Jean Illingworth

Many people have the opinion that providing more resources and opportunities will overcome Indigenous disadvantage and help Indigenous students achieve better educational outcomes. This is a myth. If it were that easy, we would have a nation of high achieving Indigenous youth. It assumes that the only problems Indigenous youth suffer from are related to poverty and lack of opportunity. The following is a discussion of what I perceive to be some of the causes of Indigenous underachievement.

ABSTUDY

Two weeks ago, a 16-year-old student from our school was picked up by the police at 3am on a Friday morning, drunk and stoned and totally unaware that he had assaulted an elderly man and stolen his wallet. The day before, this young man had received his first ABSTUDY entitlement, which had gone straight into his bank account. He was expecting it and did what all his brothers, sisters and friends had done before him—go out and get blind drunk and so stoned that he could remember nothing of the serious crime he had committed.

ABSTUDY is given to young Indigenous students with the intention to help them stay at school. This money is supposed to support their educational needs whilst they are studying. None of the students in my school knows what ABSTUDY is for. They resent being told that it is for their education and to help them stay at school longer. The majority of Indigenous students are so steeped in a culture of welfare dependency that they are unable to be discerning or even grateful for ABSTUDY.

Receiving ABSTUDY has become a sort of warped rite of passage for young Indigenous students. Prior to the age of 16, ABSTUDY is a minimal amount that usually goes into the parent's bank account. But once students reach the magic age of 16, the amount of ABSTUDY grows considerably and goes directly into their own bank account to be used as they like. There are no conditions attached and no accountability imposed. ABSTUDY is viewed as a right and not a privilege. Most students have little idea about how it actually gets into their bank accounts or what expectations and responsibilities surround the collection of this handout.

ABSTUDY is considered sacrosanct by Indigenous youth. If anyone threatens to tell Centrelink that they are not meeting the criteria set to receive ABSTUDY, such as attending school every day, students rebel. They often leave the school and move elsewhere to keep their ABSTUDY payments coming in.

Costs of disadvantage

Djarragun College supports the welfare reform initiative that Indigenous reformer Noel Pearson started in four Cape communities. The Cape York Welfare Reform Project puts Indigenous communities on the path from passive welfare dependence to economic and social independence.²⁰ It encourages employment in real jobs and private home ownership, and seeks to reduce the role of all levels of government in people's lives.

The Welfare Reform Project also targets social development. Without improvements in social development such as better educational outcomes, individuals have a reduced capacity to participate in the labour force, to make informed decisions, and to take responsibility for their actions. Social development also contributes strongly to quality of life.

The majority of the students at Djarragun College come from communities in Cape York and in the Torres Strait Islands, where basic social norms that most of mainstream society takes for granted have significantly deteriorated. The decline in community and family life has occurred in the last 30 or 40 years and most of it can be blamed on two factors: alcohol abuse and passive welfare dependence. Both are now multi-generational.

Receiving ABSTUDY has become a sort of warped rite of passage for young Indigenous students.

Pearson has argued on many occasions that long-term welfare dependence saps people of motivation and erodes personal responsibility and individual capacity. 'The current structure of income support payments in Cape York has set up a poverty trap where perverse incentives actually encourage people towards welfare, and away from real employment.'²¹

ABSTUDY is a government benefit that is rapidly destroying Indigenous youth and is rendering them hopeless, damaged and unable to become participating members of society. Money that was meant to help them stay at school longer has instead been spent on substance abuse and is usually gone by the next school day.

ABSTUDY is contributing to the abominable state of health that exists even in the very young. It is also contributing to low educational attainment, poor school attendance, escalating violence, and subsequent incarceration.

The rate at which Indigenous people in Australia come into contact with the criminal justice system continues to increase at an alarming rate. The Indigenous prisoner population has increased by an average of 6.9% per year for the past decade. This is 1.7 times the average annual growth of the non-Indigenous prison population. One in four prisoners in Australia is Indigenous and their over-representation in the jail system is only getting worse. Aborigines are 13 times more likely to be locked up than other Australians, while the proportion of Indigenous women being incarcerated has tripled in the past 20-odd years.²² Half of the 10- to 17-year-olds in corrective institutions are Indigenous.²³

Research published by the Australian National Council on Drugs has found a clear link between drug and alcohol abuse and the over-representation of Indigenous people in jail. Reports document that a large proportion of Indigenous prisoners are actually intoxicated at the time of their offence and attribute their offences to their dependence on alcohol and drugs.²⁴

It costs taxpayers approximately \$269 a day or just under \$100,000 a year to keep one person in jail.²⁵

Djarragun College

Djarragun College receives government funding of about \$30 per day or approximately \$11,000 a year per student. Government is the only source of our funding other than the small amount we can raise through connections with businesses and philanthropists. In spite of working from a miniscule budget, the college achieved what most other Indigenous schools in Australia are yet to achieve.

Our students are motivated and engaged. The results in the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests show year-on-year improvements, with many students now meeting the benchmarks and achieving beyond their age level. We currently have 70 senior students engaged in school-based traineeships, and graduated 52 students from grade 12 in 2008. Our students are happy and love coming to school. We do not have problems with boarders running away; on the contrary, our boarders are begging to come back before the holidays have ended. Noel Pearson, on his first visit to the college in 2004, stated that Djarragun College was the happiest place he had ever been to, not just the happiest school. So what is the problem?

At Djarragun, students are at the core of everything we do. This is not just an empty platitude but a statement of fact. No matter what time of the day or night, we respond to the needs of our students. This has meant staff members sitting all night in the watch house with a student in serious trouble with the police. It has meant staff members responding to emergency calls from students in the middle of the night when they are in danger or trouble. It has meant teachers working into the evening after a hectic day to ensure students receive the extra tutorial support they need. It is about 'doing whatever it takes to make it work.' There is no magic bullet to explain the success we enjoy. It amounts to hard work and a strong commitment to ensuring the success of all our students.

We do not have problems with boarders running away; on the contrary, our boarders are begging to come back before the holidays have ended.

We have a holistic approach to whatever we do and parents are engaged all the way. Parents know we will support them in order to support our students, so calls on our time to deal with parental issues that affect students have grown. We are not just a school but an organisation that embraces education, social work, child safety, and youth justice issues. We have a policy of tough love: strict discipline is the order of the day but done in a manner that honours and respects each and every child. Students know this. As they say, they 'get it.'

In spite of all this, we struggle to maintain the pace and the level of input needed to keep the successful momentum going. We watch in desperation as bright young students migrate into Years 8, 9 and 10 and embrace the drug and alcohol-fueled culture that now dominates many Indigenous families. We watch with resignation as ABSTUDY payments are used to feed alcohol and drug habits that are starting at a younger and younger age. We plead, demand and threaten our students and educate them about how damaging substance abuse is for them, but to no avail. The dominant culture in their communities is focused on drugs and alcohol. And the federal government continues to feed the misuse of ABSTUDY thinking it is doing the right thing by supporting disadvantaged students with money.

Indigenous students spend their ABSTUDY payments and arrive at school hungry. We spend much time and energy raising money wherever we can for our free breakfast and lunch program. We do this because although it could be argued that it is creating more dependence, there is no way students can study or focus or even behave in a socially acceptable manner when they are hungry. We provide school uniforms, school stationery and books, excursions ... the list goes on. All this could be covered by ABSTUDY for older students and by child endowment that parents receive for younger students. Unfortunately, we do not see a cent of this money.

Indigenous education policy

So much money has been spent in the last two decades in developing programs and incentives to entice Indigenous children to school. So many resources have been wasted on 'flash in the pan' initiatives that are supposed to be the next salvation of Indigenous education. None of them works except possibly the scholarship program, which places Indigenous students in high achieving boarding schools away from the temptations of alcohol and drugs. Government needs to take a long and hard look at the benefits it hands out to everyone, including Indigenous people.

Indigenous students are generally disadvantaged and do need support, but they do not need to be given the wherewithal to cement themselves in a culture of lifelong dependency and addiction. Instead, they need to have their basic needs met. They need food, shelter, love, and care. They need access to free dental and health care and not just when they are under 16. They need schools that have high expectations of them and are resourced at a level that does not put the school and the staff under such enormous pressure to increase educational outcomes whilst the government is unwittingly contributing to the destruction of Indigenous youth.

More than anything else, Indigenous students need parents who are independent, proud and present for their children. They need parents and teachers who surround them with tough love and instil a sense of responsibility and gratitude in them. If Indigenous education is to succeed in any way, government needs to have a radical change of policy.

Parents and students need to be accountable for every cent received, and schools that take on the hard end of education need to be funded in a more stable and sustainable way. Djarragun College has enough financial support from government for the delivery of educational programs. What Djarragun needs is extra funding and support for all the alternative programs we put in place to deal with the many social and health issues our students come to school with.

We have a policy of tough love: strict discipline is the order of the day but done in a manner that honours and respects each and every child.

The unions have to be removed from schools. We have some talented teachers at Djarragun, but unions are desperately trying to encourage them not to work as hard or show such commitment because it's outside their brief as teachers. We love new graduates because we can train them to be the sort of teachers we want, but as fast as we motivate teachers and train teachers the unions try to undo what we're doing.

We also need to have another look at the way we educate teachers. When they come to us at Djarragun College, the first-year-out graduates have often been politicised but they haven't been taught how to teach.

There are some good programs coming from the public and private sector, including rewarding fantastic teachers to work with disadvantaged students, and extending the scholarship program for Indigenous students to attend independent boarding schools. But more important than that is dealing with the government policies that go under the radar, like ABSTUDY.

Until we deal with these policy issues, we're just putting more gloss on what is essentially a rotten underbelly of Indigenous education.

We love new graduates because we can train them to be the sort of teachers we want ...

The Inverse Child Care Law

Chris Goddard

Not long before I started frontline child protection work, Dr Julian Tudor Hart first described his inverse care law, which stated that ‘the availability of good medical care tends to vary inversely with the need for it in the population served.’ Coincidentally, although not known to me at the time, Dr Hart lived not that far from where I was working in the United Kingdom.²⁶

Dr Hart was writing about health from the perspective of a GP, and his law is particularly topical now: those in greatest need of good health care receive the least. Over the years, as a child protection worker in the United Kingdom and in Australia, I developed my own child protection version of this law called the ‘inverse child care law.’ Fundamentally, those children in greatest need, children who have been abused or neglected, too often receive the least accountable, least responsive, and least transparent services, and are often treated carelessly. Over the years, I developed many subsidiary ‘inverse child care laws.’ Those who work in child protection, for example, have one of the most difficult jobs imaginable, but often receive the least support and training.

Tonight, there will be more than 31,000 children in care in Australia—most in foster care and kinship care.²⁷ Almost all are in care because they have been abused and/or neglected.

Anecdotal evidence from frontline child protection workers and other health and welfare workers suggests that there are perhaps another 30,000 children who should be in care—children who have been reported to child protection many times.

These are the two groups that I wish to talk about: those who are in the care of the state and those who perhaps should be. These are not distinct groups—and I will return to that in a moment.

The effects of child abuse are well known—disruption, disability, even death. Suffice it to say that many children who have been abused end up with problems that disrupt their education—low self-esteem, learning difficulties, behavioural problems, mental health, and relationship problems.²⁸ Many of these problems cascade into adulthood—and significant numbers of the victims perpetrate further violence or become victims again.

The two groups of children—those in care and those on the fringes of the care system—are not distinct groups is because so many children in Australia are moved in and out of the care system. In our research, we have discovered children with more than 20 placements and more than a dozen failed attempts at family reunification.

Of the 30,000 in care, more than 10,000 children who have been in care for more than five years—yes, more than five years.²⁹ Many of those have been in care since they were very young and, in my view, should have been placed for adoption, but that is another story.

Many of those 10,000 children in care for more than five years will also have had many placements, but there are no figures on how many. As a result of those placement changes—many will have changed schools several times. Again, we have no data on how many schools these children have attended. Those in and out of care also change schools many times.

In short, child abuse causes many children major educational problems. Sadly, the so-called child protection system often exacerbates those problems and causes more disruptions.

Unfortunately, there is very little research in this area. A pilot study in 2007 from the AIHW found, not surprisingly, that:

Children in care were less likely to achieve the national benchmarks ...

Indigenous children in care were even worse off—lower reading and numeracy scores than other children on orders.³⁰

**In short,
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problems.**

AIHW said the figures made a ‘compelling case’ for further work. There are other figures we should be looking at.

Data about school non-attendance, truancy and suspensions are also patchy. Some states appear to take non-school attendance more seriously than others. In NSW, there were more than 400 prosecutions in one year.³¹ In Victoria, however, Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia could not find one recent prosecution of a parent for non-school attendance of a child, even though teachers tell our researchers that many vulnerable children are truanting. Teachers also tell our researchers that they tell child protection workers that children known to be abused or at risk are not attending school—and child protection services do not respond.

Schools are vitally important for children who have been abused. Schools can provide a desperately needed protective environment—in fact, the only protective environment, for many children who are in and out of the care system, or on the edges of it. Sadly, most children who are abused and/or neglected often report further social and emotional difficulties at school, and little or no student welfare support.

A significant amount of research at Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia involves allowing children and young people to speak about their experiences—and we have also heard what adult survivors have to say. This research, by Dr Neerosh Mudaly and Dr John Frederick, gives valuable insight.³²

The children’s and adult survivors’ voices provide the most compelling case. The children told us of their sense of powerlessness and how school rarely provided a sanctuary.

Children and young people have repeatedly told us how difficult it is to disclose abuse and how adults do not want to listen.

This is what one 13-year-old boy said:

I did, but I didn’t ... want to tell. I wanted to but I didn’t ... want to, do you know what I mean? I was thinking, if I told and he found out, I would be in serious trouble ...

One young man said:

School was a nightmare; no other way of putting it, school was just a nightmare ... I’d catch the bus home, the other children would spit on me and I used to just sit there and take it, and take it, and take it.

Another said:

I got a bad reputation at school for being a smelly kid because my parents wouldn’t let me bath or shower. I had a bad self-image, so I was not a particularly well-liked kid at school. So other parents wouldn’t like their kids to be with me ... they’d say I was naughty because I’d run away from home a lot ... I hated school.

And another:

I was an absolute loner as a child and did really poorly at school. There wasn’t a lot of support. No support from the family. I was teased a lot at school—a lot ... I was sick of it, sick of being teased.

Another:

I went to ten different schools in about three years, so my schooling went out the window. I could never settle down ... I was making enemies all the time.

These children and adults tell us that, like child abuse, poor attendance at school can have lifelong consequences. Sadly, many children who have been abused also suffer at school, are regularly absent from school, and leave school early.

Schools can provide a desperately needed protective environment—in fact, the only protective environment, for many children who are in and out of the care system, or on the edges of it.

There is no excuse for this lack of important data on the number of placements of schools these children attend.

It is time we paid special attention to be paid to the educational needs of children who have been abused—to try to break the cycle of abuse and deprivation that traps so many.

There is no excuse for this lack of important data on the number of placements and the number of schools these children attend. Figures on the number of placements children in care have are readily available in the United Kingdom, and regions can be measured against each other. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, it is easy to find how many children leaving care are in education, employment or training.

As Jeremy Sammut demonstrated in his recent CIS paper *Fatally Flawed*, the lack of data avoids transparency and accountability in the child protection system.³³

So this is another of my ‘inverse child care laws.’ Children who have been abused and/or neglected need the greatest educational stability but receive the least.

Education should be seen as an important part of any therapeutic response to children who have been abused and/or neglected. We should have high ambitions for them. We should be clear about our objectives—increased placement stability will assist in increased educational stability and higher educational achievements.

As one 12-year-old girl who was terribly abused told us, it was difficult to find an adult to listen to what was happening to her:

The problem [with her counsellor] ... was she didn't want to believe the truth and that's always the problem with these people, they don't want to believe the truth, they just want to believe the easiest side, ... so then they get paid and go on to the next one and just pick the simplest out of that. They don't want to hear the truth because the truth is so much harder to understand and so much longer than a lie about the truth.

This girl's phrase ‘the truth is longer ... than a lie’ gave us the title of our book, published in 2006.³⁴

This 12-year-old had discovered her own version of the inverse child care law—those who are paid to listen to children are sometimes the least likely to, and those who are paid to protect children sometimes don't.

Endnotes

Jennifer Buckingham

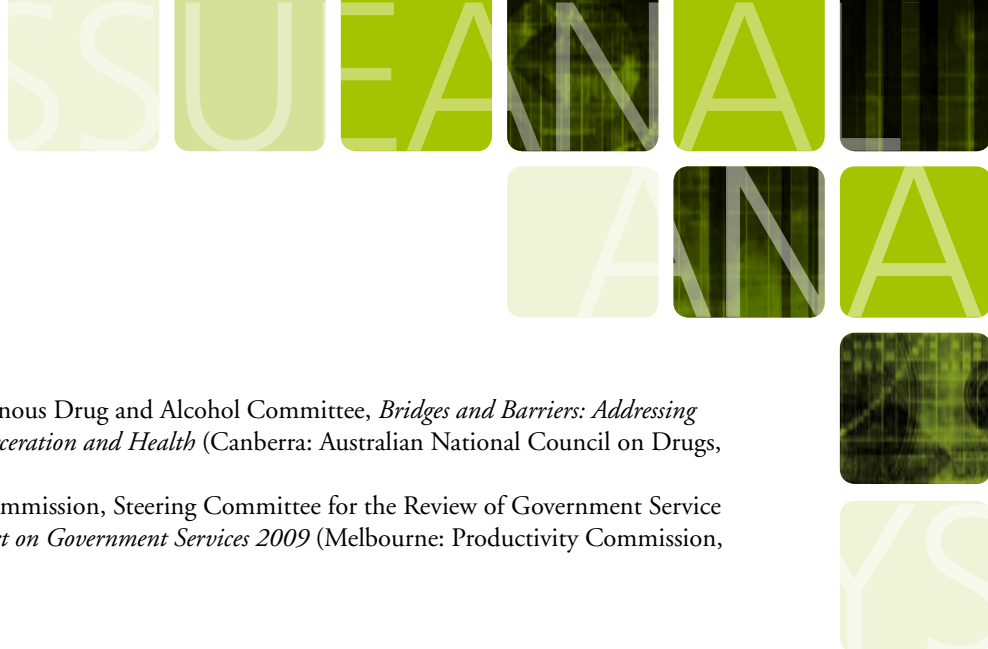
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