

The challenge of social inclusion for Australian schooling

Abstract

The social inclusion policy agenda has led to significant reform of the way in which governments deliver social services. The health and community services sectors have been transformed by structural changes emanating from “joined up government” arrangements and multi-sectoral partnerships. Yet in spite of its dominance in national and international social policy circles, the social inclusion policy agenda has had minimal impact on how we deliver schooling. Although schools play a major role in determining the life chances of individuals, education has remained beyond the reach of the social inclusion policy agenda. This paper argues that reform of our school education systems is critical to achieving a more socially inclusive society. The author identifies directions for the reform of school education policy that would improve the capacity of schools to promote social inclusion. The paper reviews recent national government policy initiatives that aim to make Australian schools more responsive to the social inclusion policy agenda. Some of the challenges for Australian education policy in promoting social inclusion are discussed.

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Introduction

Achieving social inclusion is about creating community-wide partnerships (Gillard 2008).

Social inclusion is a French policy concept which gained international currency during the 1980s through treaty negotiations in the European Union as a policy response to social exclusion (Spicker 2007, Hayes and Gray 2008). While a key contributing factor to social exclusion can be lack of resources (ie. poverty), government policies emphasise that social exclusion refers to more than simply the effects of poverty (Atkinson and Hills 1998, Berghman 1997, Stewart and Swaffield 1999, Saunders et al. 2008). Social exclusion can arise from being *invisible* to society due to factors such as old age, poverty, unemployment or geographic location or from being *actively rejected* by society, for reasons such as physical or cultural differences, contracting AIDs or being a refugee. Regardless of the direct cause, social exclusion is a state in which people or groups lack access to the social supports that promote well-being through active participation in society.

Countries such as Great Britain, which have had an explicit national policy commitment to combating social exclusion for over a decade, portray social exclusion as the outcome for individuals or groups who suffer from “a combination of linked problems”, such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown (Atkinson and Davoudi, 2000, p. 435). Policies aimed at minimising the risk of social exclusion are increasingly aiming to address these multiple problems in a co-ordinated way, through “joined-up government” arrangements and multi-sectoral partnerships between different agencies.

This paper explores the potential role of school education systems and education policy in combating social exclusion and in implementing the social inclusion policy agenda.

Schooling and social exclusion

Social inclusion is a broader policy concept than poverty and thus invokes a broader policy agenda than the more narrow (albeit important) policies that address inequities in income and wages. While people living in poverty are more likely to experience social exclusion, it is also associated with locational disadvantage, dysfunctional family relationships and family breakdown (Vinson, 2007). By adopting this broader definition, we can examine the role of institutional structures and processes in perpetuating disadvantage and identify ways in which all of society’s institutions should reform. This is consistent with the view that social exclusion is the product of our social and economic system (including cultural attitudes and values), rather than the specific “fault” of the individuals who happen to find themselves poor and/or socially excluded. When social exclusion is viewed as the result of system failure, the onus is on governments to reform their institutions in fundamental ways (Bradley

Crouchley and Oskrochi 2003, Saunders 2002, 2003). Following Saunders (2003) this author sees social inclusion as a challenge to identify the ways in which long-established social institutions should change – firstly to minimise their contribution to social exclusion, and secondly to maximise their role in creating a more inclusive society.

School education is a major publicly funded institution that services all Australian children from the ages of five through to 16 years. The purpose of schooling is to prepare students both for economic participation (ie. employment) and active citizenship. In a national statement of agreed goals for schooling, Australia's education ministers state, "schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians and in ensuring the nation's on-going economic prosperity and social cohesion" (MCEETYA 2008, p. 4). Through its role in preparing students for economic participation, schooling has the most significant impact of any public institution on the life chances of every child (Meer 2007). Yet research demonstrates that school education systems are far more likely to reproduce existing socio-economic inequalities between groups than remove them (Anderson and Vervoorn 1983).

Children enter primary school with varying degrees of readiness for formal learning. These early differences reflect students' different ages and stages of development but are also linked to their home environment. The educational level of a child's parents has a strong and persistent effect on the child's educational performance and these effects are established well before the commencement of schooling. However schooling as it is presently delivered does little to alter the early distribution of educational outcomes between social groups. In fact, the achievement gap between rich and poor students persists in the early years of schooling and widens as they progress through the school system. Children at the bottom of the distribution for literacy and numeracy achievement at the end of their first year of school continue to be ranked low in successive years while children ranked highly when they are young remain at the top of the scale. The more years students remain in schooling, the wider the achievement gap becomes. In other words, the experience of schooling serves to exacerbate (rather than redress) initial inequalities in the distribution of educational outcomes (Teese et al. 2007).

Early Childhood Education

The early years of life – especially the first three years – are now recognized as having an important influence on a child's long-term health and development. As major physical and brain development takes place before the age of three, the early childhood years can be either a window of opportunity (for enriching human development) or a window of vulnerability, where social stressors such as poverty or family dysfunction contribute to developmental delay. Vulnerable children are defined as children at risk of having poor cognitive and behavioural outcomes during their early years that will render them more vulnerable to low educational achievement at school, and unemployment and poor physical and

mental health as young adults. Vulnerable children are present in all social groups but are more prevalent among families within the lowest quartile of family income (Willms 2002).

Developmental delay in the first three years of life can result in poor language skills and motor control that impedes literacy and numeracy acquisition when the child starts school. A low level of achievement in literacy and numeracy is disempowering and prevents people from participating fully in society. It is associated with lack of engagement in school, lower levels of retention to Year 12, lower tertiary entrance scores and higher rates of unemployment (Rothman and McMillan 2003). Recent research in the field of neuroscience suggests that the stress associated with living in childhood poverty reduces the capacity of an individual's working memory, contributing to the lower school achievement rates of children from economically and socially disadvantaged families (Evans and Schamberg 2009).

Interventions to support the physical and cognitive development of vulnerable young children during the early year of life are critical to improving their long-term outcomes in education and the labour market. Yet under the age of 4 years, there is no systematic Australia-wide provision of early childhood education and family support targeted to vulnerable young children and their families. Although a range of services are provided at this level, often the children most likely to participate in early childhood programs are from higher socio-economic groups (Hayes, Gray and Edwards 2008).

Early intervention programs targeted at vulnerable children well before they start school have been shown to produce long-term benefits in the areas of: cognitive/emotional development (such as IQ and behaviour); education (reading and maths attainment and high school retention); economic well-being (employment and income); and health. Early intervention programs which actively involve the parents of children in low-income families have more lasting effects in terms of long-term educational and social outcomes than programs conducted without parental involvement. (Karoly et al. 2005). The provision of support to vulnerable children and their families during the first years of life is now recognised as crucial to increasing parental competence, reducing the social and environmental risks to vulnerable young children and contributing to improved educational, social and economic outcomes in the long term (Heckman 2006).

As the effect of schooling appears to do little more than exacerbate initial inequalities in the distribution of educational outcomes, a clear policy direction is to deliver educational services earlier and more effectively to children at the greatest risk of educational failure. However, this goal is hampered by long-standing structural divisions between the education and community services sector. Most school education systems have a legal responsibility to deliver formal education to children between the ages of 5 and 18 years and find it difficult to address issues of prior-to-school learning, or to form partnerships with other service providers. While many government and non-government

agencies in Australia are now providing some types of early educational programs for vulnerable young children and their families, their links with the school education system are generally weak. The greatest level of integration in Australia has occurred in South Australia, which has established a Social Inclusion Board, and has integrated its early childhood services and education services at the Departmental level. Further fundamental policy reform is necessary to bridge the gap between the education sector and the community services sector in meeting the needs of vulnerable young children between birth and five years of age.

The reform of school education

Fundamental reform of our century-old education system is needed for schools to improve the prospects for economic participation and active citizenship among children from the most disadvantaged families and communities. However turning schools around is a complex and nuanced process involving change in how we deliver education services at multiple levels: in schools; at the system level and through partnerships with agencies outside of the education sector.

While schools will inevitably reflect the communities that they serve, this is no longer accepted by auditors as an excuse for schools failing to improve the educational outcomes of children in disadvantaged communities. In 2007 the New South Wales Auditor-General criticised the NSW education system for making little progress since 1999 in improving the educational outcomes of socio-economically disadvantaged students. The Auditor-General's report noted that students from poor regions were twice as likely to fall below the minimum standard in Year 3 as students from wealthier areas and Indigenous students were three times as likely to fall below the minimum standard (Department of Education and Training/the Audit Office 2008). A recent Auditor-General's report in Victoria came to a similar conclusion, criticising the impact of targeted expenditure on literacy in Victorian schools. The report pointed out that the gap in literacy outcomes between advantaged and disadvantaged students has not narrowed, and that schools in the predominantly middle-class eastern suburbs still consistently out-perform other schools (Victorian Auditor-General 2009).

A growing number of education researchers are now demonstrating how schools serving disadvantaged communities can be "turned around" to produce better educational outcomes for their students (Lamb 1997, Rice 2008). Reporting four decades of research on raising student achievement in highly disadvantaged schools, Reeves parodies the view that teachers are no more than "potted plants, decorating a school with good intentions while demographic destiny marches onward" and challenges schools and teachers to change their expectations about student performance (Reeves 2008).

School-level reform

While the "prescriptions" for turning schools around in the education literature are quite technical and inaccessible to a lay audience, they can broadly be

described as increasing the school's focus on educational attainment, raising expectations, and supporting the professional learning of teachers. Ineffective teaching has a devastating impact on the performance of low-achieving students. Studies that take into account all of the available evidence on teacher effectiveness suggest that students placed with high-performing teachers will progress three times as fast as those placed with low performing teachers. At the primary level, students placed with low-performing teachers for several years in a row suffer an educational loss that is largely irreversible. These students stand very little chance of recovering in terms of educational achievement in later years (Reeves 2008).

Successful whole-school approaches to raising attainment among disadvantaged student populations involve high levels of collegiality and collaboration among teaching staff, the regular, consistent and meaningful assessment of student performance and high levels of in-school support for students identified as being at risk of failure (Reeves 2008). Other school-level strategies to known to enhance educational outcomes for disadvantaged students include improving teachers' understanding of the socio-economic background of their students, improvements in school leadership, and programs that actively seek to engage parents in their supporting their children's education (Teese 2007).

System-level reform

Improving the effectiveness of teachers alone is not enough to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged students or help to close the achievement gap. An influential study of the characteristics of the world's best educational systems (ranked as high equity/high achievement on international performance assessments), concluded that for teachers to be able to make a difference, an education system needs to do three things. First, recruit high quality teachers. Second, provide the resources for teachers to become highly effective educators. And third, put in place systems and targeted support to ensure that every child is able to benefit from quality teaching (McKinsey and Company 2007).

The McKinsey report found that top performing school systems consistently attracted more able people into the teaching profession, through a selective application process and by paying strong starting salaries. Systems then implemented strong mechanisms for improving the effectiveness of all school teachers – and succeeded in retaining the most effective teachers in the profession. As there is evidence that the most disadvantaged schools usually have the highest proportions of inexperienced teachers (Rice 2008), education systems need to reform the way in which they distribute teachers between schools and provide much more significant levels of support to teachers in schools serving disadvantaged communities.

Multi-sectoral partnerships

The structure and governance of schooling in Australia has changed little over the past century and education services delivery remains heavily sector-bound. Education should not be immune to the trend within the health and community services sectors which have responded to the social inclusion policy agenda with an increasingly holistic and “one-stop shop” approach to service delivery. A decade of government policy reform overseas has demonstrated that coordinated approaches to government service delivery are needed to help address the multiple “linked problems” commonly experienced by individuals or groups who are at risk of social exclusion. While there are many structural challenges in this approach, efforts are being made to provide more integrated, flexible and “holistic” support for individuals, families and social groups. In the health and community sectors, for example, an inclusive approach to meeting client rather than agency needs has resulted in new governance arrangements such as multi-sectoral partnerships and improved integration of policy development and service delivery through “joined-up government” reforms. While these innovations have raised complex issues of governance, professional ethics and accountability for policy makers, the push for multi-sector partnerships continues from the highest level (Gillard 2008, Hayes, Gray and Edwards 2008).

Australia’s Social Inclusion Board argues that schools need to adopt socially inclusive policies to assist children at greatest risk of long-term disadvantage, by engaging more effectively with parents and communities. Schools are also expected to work in partnership with other agencies such as health care providers, to improve the integration of services to disadvantaged families. (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2008). Schools and school systems face a major challenge in developing wider partnerships with other agencies for the purpose of serving students experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage. In many cases, the obstacles are based in legislation, which restrict the role of schools and systems to serving children enrolled in formal school education. These obstacles will need to be overcome if schools are to form more effective partnerships with other agencies, to address the needs of children experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage.

Challenges for Australian education policy

Research on improving teacher effectiveness is influencing policy development in Australian education. Several government inquiries over the past decade have suggested that Australia’s approach to teacher preparation and recruitment could be improved. A national system for the accreditation of teacher preparation programs is now being discussed in Australia. However the federal system makes policy development in Australian education more complex than in many other countries, in the sense that the states and territories have constitutional responsibility for schooling. Nevertheless, in its National Education Agreement with the states and territories announced in December 2008, the Federal government earmarked \$550 million over five years for projects and partnerships to improving the quality of teaching and school leadership through

national reforms to attract, retain, train, place develop and retain quality teachers and school leaders (COAG 2008).

The COAG communiqué announcing the National Education Agreement opens with the statement, “Reform in the way education and training is delivered is critical to driving our future productivity and increasing social inclusion”. (COAG 2008 p. 19). In addition to the national partnership initiative on teacher quality, the agreement includes two other areas for national partnerships to develop: addressing the educational needs of students in low socio-economic status school communities (\$1.1 billion over five years); and achieving sustainable improvements in literacy and numeracy, particularly for Indigenous children (\$500 million over five years). The National Education Agreement replaces more than a dozen specific purpose programs, provides increased total funding over previous years, and offers simplified reporting arrangements in respect of approximately \$58.6 billion over five years (2008-09 to 2012-13).

The Federal Minister for Education, Julia Gillard insists that the government will be using reforms initiated through the COAG to reduce the achievement gap between students in different regions. Given the constitutional division of responsibilities for education, the Federal government will do this primarily by making state school systems more accountable for how they deliver education in schools serving disadvantaged communities (Gillard 2008). To this end, the Commonwealth government has established a major new accountability body, the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority*. This Authority is empowered to develop and administer national assessments of student performance and to publish information relating to the comparative performance of schools. However, with a Board dominated by representatives of government and non-government school systems and only one member appointed by the Commonwealth, it remains to be seen how effectively the new Authority performs this role.

Federal Education Minister Julia Gillard has articulated a strong new policy direction for Australian schooling, articulated in terms of educational equity, school effectiveness and social inclusion. She has made it clear that she expects schools and systems to address entrenched inequalities in student learning outcomes and portrays the persistence of a wide gap in achievement between schools serving different socio-economic groups as evidence of ineffective teaching, poor school leadership and policy failure (Gillard 2008, Hayes, Gray and Edwards 2008).

With the election of the Labor federal government in 2007, social inclusion has featured on the national policy agenda for the first time. And although it has been prominent in state and territory government policies for many years, social inclusion has never had a significant impact on the delivery of school education at the state level. In one aspect, schools have changed over the past two decades to become more socially inclusive, through an explicit policy direction that promotes the integration of children with a disability into mainstream schooling. But beyond this, governments have been slow to discuss any of the more

profound institutional reforms in education policy that would minimise the sector's contribution to social exclusion or maximise its role in creating a more inclusive society.

There is a need for a national debate on how Australia's education system should be reformed to make it more socially inclusive. Such a debate should include a discussion of how to re-focus schooling to better meet the needs of vulnerable children and their families and how to extend education services to vulnerable children before the ages of five. Issues of how schools are funded and held accountable for enhancing the educational outcomes of socially disadvantaged children should also be addressed. The extent to which our school systems reproduce educational advantage, entrench socio-economic segregation and contribute to social exclusion should also be the subject of more extensive inquiry. Schools inevitably reflect broader trends in society and the rising socio-economic segregation between Australian schools due to the effects of locational disadvantage and increased parental choice should be monitored closely for its impact on the learning outcomes of disadvantaged students.

Conclusion

Australian schools are entering a new era of accountability for their performance in terms of the contribution they make to social inclusion. The Federal government has emphasised its intention to develop stronger transparency and accountability measures to monitor how effectively schools meet the needs of socially disadvantaged students. Australian schools are now expected to promote social inclusion by maximising the educational achievement of students from the most disadvantaged families and communities and in closing the achievement gap.

To date, major aspects of education policy, such as funding and governance arrangements, curriculum design, the structure and location of schools and the quality of teaching have been developed and implemented with little reference to social inclusion as a policy goal. This is likely to change under the National Education Agreement which emphasises the role of schools in promoting social inclusion and is targeting funding to address the needs of students in low socio-economic status school communities. However major structural issues will need to be addressed if Australian education systems are to fulfil their role in contributing to a more socially inclusive society.

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