

BLA06053

OVERCOMING DISADVANTAGE THROUGH THE INNOVATIVE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Australia is a high performing but low equity country with regards to educational attainment. Low socio-economic background students and schools with large numbers of these students perform less well than higher socio-economic background students and schools. Yet some schools are turning around student learning outcomes despite the impact of disadvantage.

With funding from The R E Ross Trust, Education Foundation Australia is conducting a study into how schools in our most disadvantaged communities are breaking the pattern of low student engagement and achievement. Informed by a review of research and practice, the study documents the learning strategies used by nine Victorian schools to engage low socio-economic background students in the crucial middle years, what supports or hinders them in their work and how successful models can be implemented across other schools serving high poverty communities.

METHODOLOGY

The study has four main components.

A review of the research literature was conducted to set the study in context in relation to student disadvantage, disengagement and attempts by systems and schools to change teaching and learning for the middle years.

Interviews were held with five key research and policy informants to add a grounded, local understanding to the findings of the literature review.

Case studies were created to understand the experience of local schools in disadvantaged communities that are implementing student-centred learning strategies for the middle years and identify the processes integral to introducing and maintaining these strategies. Five government and four Catholic system schools agreed to participate in the study. These comprise four government secondary colleges, four Catholic primary schools and one government primary school: unsuccessful attempts were made to engage a Catholic secondary school. The western metropolitan region of Melbourne was selected as the

focus of the study because of the comparatively high degree of socio-economic disadvantage among its schools. At the start of 2006, the region had the highest proportion of government schools in Victoria with a significant number of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds (measured by the proportion of students in receipt of the Education Maintenance Allowance, Youth Allowance or Austudy) or for whom English is not a first language. This study uses school inclusion in the Department of Education and Training's Like School Groups 6-9 or comparable categories used by the Catholic Education Office Melbourne as a proxy for student disadvantage.

The schools were firstly selected because they fitted these categories of student disadvantage. The impact of student, family and community disadvantage in the case study schools shows up in students' lack of home access to fundamental learning tools like computers and the internet and in what the schools see as students' limited life experience within the context of Melbourne's social and cultural offerings. Students rarely leave the suburb in which they live. Their daily experience is severely limited by family poverty and long parental working hours. Leisure activity is focused around television and, for older students, the local mall. One of the schools that participated in this study is located 20 kilometres from the heart of Melbourne's central business district. The city buildings are clearly in sight on the horizon and well connected to the area by trains and buses. Not far from the school runs the nation's largest highway, crisscrossed by vehicle and pedestrian bridges, yet the Principal says: "our students never cross the bridge out of this suburb".

The schools were also recommended for participation by the Western Metropolitan Region office of the Department of Education and Training (for the government system schools) and the Western Region office of the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (for the Catholic system schools) on the grounds that they are well embarked on the implementation of student-centred learning in the middle years. One school leader and up to three teachers in each of the nine schools participated in an initial 45 minute semi-structured interview and supplementary telephone interviews. These were followed some months later by a second round of 45 minute semi-structured interviews with school leaders to discuss the study's draft recommendations. A number of the schools provided documents such as evaluation reports and proposals that have been used in the study.

One meeting of a **Reference Group** was held to advise on practical strategies to support the take-up of student-centred learning across more schools.

POSTCODE POVERTY AND EDUCATION

While learning outcomes are improving for Australian students as a group, outcomes for those at the bottom end are worsening. There is evidence that the single most important determinant of student achievement in Australia is individual socio-economic status (SES) as measured by parents' occupation. Compared to students from high SES backgrounds, students from low SES backgrounds are:

- Twice as likely to under-perform in literacy and numeracy
- More likely to have negative attitudes to school, truant, be suspended or expelled and leave school early
- More likely to struggle with the transition from school to work
- Less likely to enter university or to succeed in vocational education courses
- More likely to live in public housing, which is associated with lower educational attainment due to overcrowding, poor resources and a lack of social networks
- Less likely to have educationally supportive social and physical infrastructure at home
- Unlikely to escape poverty while they are young: more than three quarters of children born into low SES families are still in low SES families when they turn 12 (Keating & Lamb, 2004; Productivity Commission, 2005; Taylor & Fraser, 2003; Teese & Polesel, 2003; Thomson, 2002; Watson & Considine, 2003; Zappalà & Considine, 2001).

Educational disadvantage is strongly linked to geography (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2005; Keating & Lamb, 2004; Teese, 2000; Teese & Polesel, 2003; Thomson, 2002) and, like geographic disadvantage, may prove resistant to change (Vinson, 2004). Poor students are more likely to be clustered in economically depressed regions with low educational profiles. They are also more likely to be clustered in schools that have poor educational outcomes. This means that schools with the weakest students and the greatest need for responsive approaches to support them have the least capacity to provide these (Keating & Lamb, 2004).

TURNING AROUND DISADVANTAGE THROUGH LEARNING

There is a long-standing argument that what is taught and how it is taught can either perpetuate or ameliorate inequity (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett, 1982; Grant, Badger, Wilkinson, Rogers & Munt, 2003; Haberman, 1991; Teese, 2000; Teese & Polesel, 2003). Student-centred learning is advocated as effective learning for all students, but its adoption across many systems has a clear equity agenda.

Internationally, few schools combine high concentrations of student poverty with high student achievement. Those that do have a student-centred approach to teaching and learning. They also have:

- An integrated approach to change that takes in teaching, curriculum, assessment, school organization and school culture
- Effective and supportive school leadership
- High expectations by leadership of staff and by teachers of students accompanied by respectful and caring relationships amongst adults, amongst students and between adults and students
- Collaborative decision-making between leadership and staff and a cooperative

- culture amongst teachers
 - High teacher quality and policies, structures and resources that support continued teacher development
 - Relationships with parents and the wider community that support families and enrich learning
- (Cole, 2001; Hill & Russell, 1999; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards & Zyngier, 2004).

The case study schools have all implemented some form of student-centred learning in the middle years. This approach to learning goes under many names, but has a number of common characteristics:

- It personalises teaching and learning to meet individual student needs
- It emphasises building meaning and understanding rather than completing tasks
- It is based on a challenging curriculum connected to students' lives
- It enables the student to be an active participant in his or her learning
- It encourages cooperation between students
- It is guided by rather than centred around the teacher
- It connects learning to the wider community outside the school.

WHAT SUPPORTS THE SCHOOLS

FINDING WORKABLE MODELS AND OWNING NEW PRACTICE

Effective leaders of disadvantaged schools use external opportunities to bring about improvement in their schools (Harris & Chapman, 2002). The case study schools are all strongly involved in the educational reforms in train in Victoria but most had already made a decision to change and have only adopted systemic reforms after testing them against their own priorities. Given the anecdotal evidence that many schools in high poverty areas are overwhelmed by the current reforms, this ability to select the most capacity-building opportunities is essential.

One of the biggest challenges in generating change is finding proven models. While the Catholic case study schools were given a model for student-centred practice through the systemic Middle Years Literacy Project, the government schools developed theirs through extensive research including observation of other schools that have turned around learning and engagement in low socio-economic communities: *"it is no good trying to reinvent the wheel. You need to learn from what has already been done with success"* (principal). Learning from other schools is not a simple process, however. The schools' own attempts to disseminate their models to other schools are hampered by lack of time and by competition between schools.

A COMMITMENT TO TEACHER LEARNING

The school effectiveness movement encourages schools to become professional learning

communities where teachers collaboratively examine their classroom practice and use research to improve practice across the school (Elmore, 2006; Hill & Russell, 1999; Hopkins, 2004; Istance, 2006). This is particularly important in improving student learning in disadvantaged schools (Grant et al, 2003). All of the case study schools have developed teacher professional learning teams, often using the Professional Action-Inquiry Team model developed by Dr Neville Johnson (Johnson, 2003). Teachers meet on a weekly timetabled basis to share ideas, planning and practice and act as informal coaches for one another. In addition, the schools bring their whole staff together in regular professional learning forums. Some have created specialist roles to support teacher learning and developed relationships with academics and consultants who act as critical friends and mentors. These learning structures are a big commitment for schools with limited resources, but they are seen as indispensable: *“if you don’t invest in the teacher, you can forget the whole thing. You need to support the teacher in the classroom, in their teaching practice, in teams, across the school” (principal).*

A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

Sustainable good practice has to happen on a whole-school basis: reforms not integrated into the school culture will fail. The case study school principals are keenly aware of this: *“all children can learn given sufficient time and support, but if you don’t transport this belief fully into the school, it doesn’t work” (principal).* Some of the schools have seen changes to their culture following the introduction of student-centred learning: *“it is like a new school, because the culture now supports learning in a wider sense” (principal).* In others, student-centred learning has arisen out of an existing culture that includes responsiveness to student needs, cooperation between staff, supportive leadership and resilience in the face of challenge.

SEEING GOOD OUTCOMES

All of the schools claim marked improvements in student engagement since the introduction of student-centred learning, citing greater confidence, more on-task learning behaviours, improved group dynamics and a greater ability to respond to a challenging curriculum. They also cite higher teacher expectations of students and stronger relationships between students and teachers. The schools attribute these changes to a more student-centred classroom, more focused teacher-student relationships, more explicit messages about learning from teachers and greater consistency in approach from class to class and subject to subject. While some of the schools stress that *“for students at this level of need, change is gradual - it won’t happen overnight” (teacher),* others describe an almost instant improvement in learning behaviours: *“kids are really seeing their own learning develop and improve” (teacher).*

The schools strongly believe that they add value to students’ performance: their students start from a very low base and often show improvement beyond what might be expected. Despite these outcomes, they may always show low student achievement compared to the state average. The schools believe that measurement of achievement needs to be more

linked to the student-centred learning happening in the classroom and should measure individual student progress against their own starting point: *“if you just looked at the current data on this school, you’d want to close us down. There has to be a way of measuring the growth in student learning, let alone in their personal and social development”* (principal).

WHAT CHALLENGES THE SCHOOLS

FINDING THE MONEY

Student-centred learning comes at a cost. Out-of-school experiences, smaller classes and time for teacher learning are expensive. None of the schools are able to raise funds through their parent body. Some have been inventive in gaining support from local government, industry and the philanthropic sector including Education Foundation Australia and its partners, but funds remain tight and the schools have concerns about the way that they are offered: *“there are too many organisations providing money for projects. This encourages many schools to adopt any number of short-term programs just to get their hands on some money. Consolidation of funds into long-term projects that support effective teacher development through access to excellent pedagogy and mentoring would have more long-term benefits for teachers and therefore for students”* (principal).

The development of good teaching practice takes effort and experimentation. The shortage of time for learning and exchanging ideas is a source of frustration for staff who want to see real progress quickly: *“you know that changing your practice as a teacher will change outcomes for the kids, so you want it to all happen at once”* (principal). The Department of Education & Training’s Teacher Professional Leave program and similar programs run by the Catholic Education Office Melbourne aim to build a professional learning culture, but they do this mainly by providing funds to replace staff who go out of the school to attend professional development or observe practice in other schools. Ironically, this means that teacher learning happens outside its central context. The principals would prefer an increase in their core staffing or untagged funding that they could allocate to additional staffing.

BRINGING ALL TEACHERS ON BOARD

When asked what one thing would make the biggest difference to student outcomes, the principals say: *“more teachers who consciously think about their pedagogy, who are active learners and conversant with the most current and powerful models for learning, who feel they can take professional risks with kids and work together as a team”*. Yet a number of the schools are hampered by varying degrees of teacher readiness to take on new practice. One school is taking a staged approach: in 2006, teachers can still elect to stay out of the middle school but are exposed to new practice through the professional learning teams. At another, middle years staff not prepared to change their practice are transferred to the earlier years where student-centred learning has been in place for some years and where they have no choice but to adopt it. A third school delivered the middle years program to staff with the message that *“you can*

refine it, but you can't block it. It is happening" (teacher). In a fourth, an original team of three staff developed the strategy before disseminating it to the staff body: "most of these volunteered to participate, a few were conscripted" (teacher).

ENGAGING PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

Student-centred learning should include real life learning experiences meaningfully linked to community contexts, but family factors and limited capacity make this difficult for the schools to implement. In high social capital schools, access to such experiences is often facilitated by parents with connections to business, industry and cultural organisations. The case study schools lack this support: *"we're on the back foot in providing enriching learning experiences. We don't have these opportunities on our doorstep: we would have to fund the kids to get there by bus, but the cost of this is prohibitive. Instead we bring people into the school, but it means we get someone to run a puppet show instead of going to the Arts Centre" (principal).* Even though these are dynamic, outward-looking schools, they generally lack the capacity to build or maintain partnerships with outside organisations that could bring in needed resources and opportunities.

Student-centred learning should also be supported by close links between parents and schools, especially in disadvantaged areas, but forming these links remains difficult for the schools. Instead of supporting the work of the school, many of the parents need support from it. Some of the schools link up with welfare and community organisations, government agencies and police to run parental support programs. They have tried various strategies to involve parents in their learning strategies, but with little success: *"because of the nature of the parent community, the process of engaging these parents takes a long time. Like student improvement, results are not necessarily observable for the first 12 months" (principal).*

MEETING WIDER STUDENT NEEDS

Changing the way that teachers teach and students learn is essential work and all of the case study schools are doing it, but meeting the full range of student needs remains a huge challenge and none of the schools believe that they have the resources to do it. They stress the importance of more specialist teachers to meet specific student learning needs: *"I'd like a team of staff to improve literacy development across the school. If we could get all the kids to a better base literacy level, the sky would be the limit" (principal).* They also stress the need for more specialist support to meet non-learning needs: *"if governments were serious about this, every school would have a dedicated welfare coordinator" (principal); "We could have a three day a week counsellor in here and still not meet all of our students' needs" (principal).*

RECOMMENDATIONS

The multiple barriers to good student outcomes require multiple solutions. This study makes four provisional recommendations for school systems and the sectors that support schools.

- 1 **Genuine improvement in student outcomes requires good teacher practice, not short-term programs.** A new funding formula should increase the core staffing of schools in disadvantaged communities to provide the flexibility and structures for in-school teacher learning on a sustainable basis.
- 2 **Schools and teachers in disadvantaged communities need models of proven practice and the tools to implement them in their own local context in a sustainable way.** For student-centred learning to flourish in more schools in disadvantaged communities, work is needed to develop more rigorous definitions of the approach, collect evidence of its positive impact on student outcomes and disseminate workable models to schools. School systems also need to support a learning system that spreads knowledge and good practice and fosters collegiality between schools.
- 3 **Schools in disadvantaged communities need support from business, industry, not-for-profit and community organisations to improve the learning and wellbeing of students and their families.** Workable partnerships need to be developed between schools and other organisations to address the learning and non-learning needs of students and families in ways that schools are not resourced to address. Part of the funding for these partnerships should come from areas of government responsible for community wellbeing. Without this, schools risk becoming welfare instead of learning organisations.
- 4 **Schools need new complementary measures of student outcomes that recognise student progress and reward schools and teachers adding value to student outcomes in the face of disadvantage.** These would accompany existing measures. There is a role for independent organisations to generate more discussion of this issue across school systems.

In addition to these recommendations, three models for deeper change flow out of the observations of this study.

- 1 **Student-centred schools.** Many educationalists argue that the raft of innovations in schools over the years have not changed their basic nature as institutions or altered the purposes of schooling. The implementation of student-centred learning in the classroom begs the question of what it would take to create student-centred schools. While good learning outcomes are one essential part of the route out of entrenched disadvantage, young people's wider efficacy and resilience are another part. Students are the most neglected players in the work of school improvement and learning reform, yet with the right skills and sense of purpose, they can transform their schools and build capacity in their communities.

- 2 **Schools as community centres.** In 2002, a national report proposed that schools be reconfigured as “focal points of community development” (Feeney, Feeney, Norton, Simons, Wyatt & Zappalà, 2002) to offer education and advisory services for the entire community supported by partnerships between government, business, welfare agencies and community members. Educators have been arguing for this for years and there are numerous models in practice. The United Kingdom’s Extended Schools program provides childcare, adult education, parenting support programs, community-based health and social care services through the agency of the school. In the United States, the Los Angeles Elizabeth Learning Center works with public, private and community partners to provide learning for students, support parents’ learning through adult education programs, foster community involvement and assist students and their families through a range of health and counseling services (Centre for Community Child Health, 2006).

- 3 **Shared responsibility for young people.** The landmark Eldridge Report (Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001) argued that the future of young people is the shared responsibility of the whole community and called for community partnerships with strong local ownership to develop “local solutions for local problems”. One of the most obvious local partnerships is between schools - government, Catholic and independent – serving disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Keating (2006) points to numerous examples of collaborative arrangements between government and non-government schools including integrated senior secondary programs, joint facilities, the exchange of personnel and shared student support services. These examples need to be developed as formal practice across school sectors so that, in the words of one school principal at a recent Education Foundation Australia forum, the school system can “build community capacity to take responsibility for all young people in the area”.

The final report will be available on the Education Foundation Australia website (www.educationfoundation.org.au) in early 2007. For more information about the project, contact Rosalyn Black on 03 9665 5903 or ros.black@educationfoundation.org.au

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