

Connecting research, policy and practice to achieve social inclusion for the most disadvantaged

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Achieving social inclusion for the most disadvantaged: Challenges and solutions

Today we've heard a diverse range of perspectives on social inclusion – including what it is, how Australia is tracking on its social inclusion agenda, and how various population groups, such as those experiencing mental illness are faring. We've also heard how we might better support a range of groups to achieve social inclusion.

I'd like to explore two key areas with you:

- Firstly, what are some of the key features of the agenda that we want to ensure are maintained
- And secondly, how can we better support the social inclusion of children and young people.

Turning first to the merits of the social inclusion agenda. These include:

- Its capacity to bring together both social and economic policy.
- Its acknowledgement of the multidimensional nature of both inclusion and exclusion.
and
- Its focus both on the characteristics of individuals and the systemic forces that contribute to inclusion or exclusion.

These are key aspects which have taken our collective thinking as policy makers, researchers and practitioners, beyond a focus on poverty or financial disadvantage alone. Significantly, this approach also acknowledges the role of governments and institutions in shaping a more socially inclusive nation. These are important dimensions which resonate with The Smith Family and its work on the ground with thousands of children and families in 97 communities across Australia, and they ought not to be overlooked in our critiquing of social inclusion.

If, as some of us may feel, there is a level of frustration about what we've collectively achieved to date under the social inclusion agenda, let's acknowledge the scale of the task and the significant global forces which have been at play. And let us also be clear, about the sort of public policy frameworks that we **do not** want to see. That is, those that:

- Focus predominantly on the deficits of individuals,
- That fail to acknowledge the need for systemic changes in some of our key institutions and systems,
- That see no connection between social and economic policy
and

- Which walk away from grappling with how to address some of our major social issues in different and more comprehensive ways.

Let me turn now to one of the major challenges and opportunities that I see for achieving social inclusion for those who are most disadvantaged. One of the four fundamental pillars of the agenda in Australia has been that ‘all Australians will have the resources, opportunities and capability to learn by participating in education and training’. There is now significant evidence of the key role education has in promoting a socially inclusive society. Equally, there is strong evidence that many of those who are most disadvantaged in Australia have had poor educational outcomes. This evidence has been fundamental to The Smith Family recently refining its mission to ‘creating opportunities for young Australians in need by providing long-term support for their participation in education’. The key role education has in addressing intergenerational and social disadvantage is why each year The Smith Family supports well over 100,000 children and young people to participate in education.

Despite the fundamental importance of education to economic and social wellbeing, both for individuals and the nation as a whole, the national social inclusion agenda has, to date, largely ignored the school setting as a place for either promoting social inclusion or one where exclusion is readily experienced. The agenda has tended to focus on children and young people in three areas, namely:

- Improving children’s access to learning in the early years.
 - Tracking the proportion of 15 to 24 years who are fully engaged in education and/or work, including the proportion who attain Year 12 or equivalent.
- and
- As members of a jobless family, where the major focus has been on the parent/s, with children largely seen as an ‘add on’.

These three areas are all important – indeed one of The Smith Family’s goals is to increase the proportion of young people advancing to Year 12 – but as Bettina and Jen’s presentation has shown, the issue of social inclusion for young people goes well beyond these areas. As their work, and that of The Smith Family shows, a significant number of young Australians are experiencing economic adversity and reduced opportunities. By 15 years of age, or indeed well before, some young people’s participation habits and learning orientations have already been adversely affected by repeated experiences of limited access to opportunities, supports and services.

For young people as a group, schools are a key site where exclusion or inclusion can take place. For some young people the equation is simple, if there’s no food for school, they don’t go to school. For other young people, clear choices are made about what schools they attend (including within the public education system) and what subjects they take, based on the costs involved. For others, the inability to participate in school excursions or sporting and cultural activities begins early, bringing with it stigma, reduced developmental opportunities and the adaption of their preferences, often in order to buffer and protect their family.

The process whereby disadvantaged young people adapt their preferences is understandable, given it helps them retain their own and their family’s dignity. However it results in young people having restricted opportunities in a whole range of areas, including education, employment and civic and social participation. It also sees them taking on a role that we would more usually associate with a later stage of development, and indeed with adulthood. It’s pretty confronting for us to think about children and young people making adaptive preferences – as we know they are – that mean they miss out, for example, on courses that are most closely attuned with their interests or aligned with

their longer-term labour market prospects. Such preferences are at odds with the notion of supporting young people to reach their potential – a key aim of a social inclusion agenda.

In addition, for those young people who are in schools in highly disadvantaged communities, there are fewer bridges to the wider networks and resources that are important in supporting employment and educational pathways and serve to promote inclusion.

Today there are around three and a half million students in Australia's schools, yet the national social inclusion agenda has had a rather light focus on them. This could, in part, be attributed to the role the states and territories play in the delivery of school education or to the many issues and population groups who have a claim on such an agenda. However, the proportion of Australia's population who are in schools, the influence – positive or negative – which schools have on the short and longer term wellbeing of individuals and the nation as a whole, as well as the policy and funding role the Commonwealth has in schools, highlight that this is an area that well and truly merits focus from a national social inclusion perspective.

The recently released Gonski *Review of Funding for Schooling* argues strongly for a schooling system which is characterised by both high performance and high equity. It argues that in Australia, differences in educational outcomes ought not to be the result of 'differences in wealth, income, power or possessions'. The review specifically states that it supports the view that 'all children are capable of learning and achieving at school in the right circumstances and with the right support.' And it argues that 'ensuring that all Australian children, whatever their circumstance, have access to the best possible education and chance to realise their full potential can be considered the moral imperative of schooling'. This is strong language, but language that resonates with an organisation like The Smith Family which sees everyday both the opportunities and challenges facing disadvantaged children and young people.

There is a range of national data showing that there is currently a significant gap in educational performance, that correlates with factors such as a child's socio-economic background and where they live. This is not the hallmark of an equitable or indeed a socially inclusive society.

So having mounted the case for a national focus on the role of schools in promoting social inclusion, what are some of the opportunities before us in this space? Clearly the Gonski review provides a significant opportunity. Its proposed funding model takes into account both individual student factors which are known to impact on educational outcomes, such as low socioeconomic background, Indigeneity and disability, as well as school level factors, such as the concentration of disadvantage.

However of equal importance to the quantum of resources available to individual schools, is how these resources will actually be spent. There is much in the Review which resonates with a social inclusion agenda – albeit not named as such. Significantly, it acknowledges that learning and education are the responsibility of the community as a whole and not schools alone. It references research which highlights the importance of parental engagement, and affirms the role community engagement, including philanthropy, can have on improving educational and post-school outcomes.

The Smith Family's practical experience and ongoing research confirms that strong school-community partnerships - in which schools, families, not-for-profit organisations, governments, business, and philanthropy work together - are a central pillar for improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children and young people and for promoting their enhanced social inclusion. There is also growing evidence of the important facilitating role that not-for-profits can play in maximising the impact of school-community partnerships. As many of you would know, the

Communities for Children program has used this model to very good effect. The Smith Family would urge that such an approach be now much more actively supported – at a policy, programmatic and funding level – within the Australian school system. The size of the educational equity challenge facing Australia, the increasing complexity faced by schools with high numbers of disadvantaged students, and the clear need for schools to be able to leverage resources, skills and support from beyond the school system, demands strong, long-term and genuine school-community partnerships.

A number of school-community partnership approaches are currently being implemented around Australia, such as the Extended School Hub pilots being run by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and in which The Smith Family is playing a lead role. At their best, these approaches:

- Acknowledge the multiple factors that influence educational outcomes for children and young people
- They emphasise the role of schools is to prepare young people for life and to create a foundation of *learning to learn*, rather than preparing them for a specific and potentially time-limited career.
- They have a strong focus on relationships, both at the individual level and also between agencies and institutions at a systems level.
- They have a strong focus on the voice of young people themselves within the planning, design and implementation stages.
- They have clearly defined outcomes which are seen as the collective responsibility of a range of parties and accountability processes which allow for ongoing improvement.
- And they move well beyond ‘joined up’ service delivery to fundamental paradigm shifts which centre on the young-person and take account of the multiple life contexts and identities of students in the 21st century.

Much of this resonates with areas in which the social inclusion agenda has already been active. There is also emerging evidence that these school-community approaches contribute to improved outcomes across a range of domains for students, parents, teachers, schools and communities themselves. Yet nationally, we are still in the very early stages of the take up of such approaches.

The Gonski review and the Commonwealth’s *Empowering local schools* initiative, which in turn is being complemented in a number of states with policy initiatives that aim to increase the autonomy of school principals, potentially provide an opportunity for these approaches to be much more widely realised. The national social inclusion agenda could play an important role in increasing the likelihood of this opportunity being realised, through taking a much stronger interest and leadership role in the schooling arena than has occurred so far, and by actively sharing the lessons learnt from the implementation of the social inclusion agenda over the last five years or so. Given the issues and population groups that have been the focus of the agenda to date, there will be much of relevance.

From the perspective of The Smith Family this is a time of enormous opportunity for enhancing the social inclusion of the three and a half million young Australians who are students of our schooling system, and in particular for those who are most disadvantaged. As a recently released book edited by Tom Stehlik and Jan Patterson from South Australia suggests, we need a changing paradigm if education is to be the key to a socially inclusive future for children and young people. The Smith Family looks forward to working with young people and their families, governments, educational institutions, other non-government organisations, business, philanthropy and the wider community to bring about this socially inclusive future.