

Address to the Social Determinants of Health Conference

– Dr Lisa O’Brien



Introduction

Before I start I'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land on which we are meeting today – the Gadigal people of the Eora nation – and pay my respects to their Elders past and present.

In my speech today I'll be discussing the barriers to education for the most vulnerable children and young people in our community: what impact disadvantage has on educational outcomes and why education matters for people interested in health.

Perhaps more importantly, I'll also be touching on what we can do to tackle the problem.

Painting the picture of educational disadvantage

Those of you with eye and ear towards these issues might remember hearing last week the results of a major new international report – the PISA 2012 Report – which compares the performance of Australia's 15 year olds in mathematical, science and reading literacy with their peers in 64 other countries around the world?

The results weren't good.

Overall, the PISA results – PISA is short for the Programme for International Student Assessment – showed that between 2000 and 2012 Australia's test scores in all three categories declined significantly.

That's concerning enough, but for The Smith Family – and we are Australia's largest provider of education support to disadvantaged children and young people – the results were even more alarming.

That's because they showed a gap of two-and-a-half years in performance between Australian students from the highest and lowest socio-economic backgrounds, across all three areas of testing.

Let me repeat: an educational performance gap of two-and-a-half years schooling.

Alarming as that result is, sadly, it doesn't come as a surprise.

The PISA results are the latest in a long line of data which only provides further confirmation that young Australians from disadvantaged backgrounds are not getting the education they need and aren't realising their potential.

One month ago it was the COAG Reform Council which revealed the gap in Year 12 attainment between young Australians from low and high socio-economic backgrounds is close to 20 per cent.

A figure that has remained virtually unchanged for five years.

And that after leaving school, four-in-10 young Australians from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are not fully engaged in work or study, compared to almost two-in-10 among the most advantaged – larger than the gap in 2006.

How does disadvantage impact on education?

There are a range of reasons why young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have fallen – and are falling further – behind in their educational outcomes.

For children, the effects of low socio-economic status can result in less satisfactory early development before and after birth.

One-fifth of Australian children are developmentally vulnerable in one or more key areas when they start school.

This includes the area of 'physical health' but also in the language and cognitive skills needed for school.

Disadvantage can mean young Australians are living in a family that doesn't have enough income to access the goods and services that are essential for everyday living.

The family may not regularly have enough food, or be able to meet the costs of basic utilities such as electricity or gas, or afford dental services for their children.

If you're hungry or have a problem with your health it's hard to concentrate on what's going on in class.

Disadvantage can also mean that children don't have access to important learning resources such as books or a computer in their home.

Financial vulnerability also means many are unable to participate in school camps, hobbies and the sport and leisure activities that are the norm for other young people.

This not only has an impact on their learning and development, but can also leave them feeling isolated from their peers.

Education is about more than books and what goes on in the classroom – as important as those are.

A true and comprehensive education offers a full range of experiences and opportunities, including access to sport and creative expression.

The Smith Family's own research shows that half of all children living in Australia's most disadvantaged communities – around 208,000 kids – did not get the chance to participate in any sport or cultural activities outside of school hours over the last 12 months.

This compares to just one-in-ten kids living in the most advantaged communities.

As they reach their teens, children in communities with high levels of early school leaving and unemployment often lack positive role models and the networks so crucial in building resilience.

Without access to such important foundations, many are likely to disengage from post-school study and lower their career aspirations.

When some or all of these factors are at play, it can be very difficult for a child or young person to keep up with their education over the long-term.

And let's remember, a good education – having solid literacy skills – is central to an individual's ability to manage one's health.

People with low literacy skills are less likely to complete school, more likely to be unemployed and on income support, and more likely to experience poor health.

What do we need to do?

This is what The Smith Family encounters in the 96 Australian communities where it has a presence every single day.

Turning this situation around requires concerted effort across a range of fronts.

It will also require a long-term cross-government, business and community partnership that recognises we all have a responsibility to give vulnerable Australian children the education they deserve.

Invest in early stages of learning and transition points

The Smith Family is a strong supporter of the benefit of investing in the early years.

We know the importance of this from both an educational and a health perspective.

But more importantly we believe, as does the Nobel prize-winning economist, James Heckman, that we need to keep on investing, in a balanced way, and particularly through transition points – the move into primary school, to secondary school, to post-school learning or employment – to achieve increased rates of school completion and university enrolment, improvement in health outcomes and a reduction in welfare dependence.

Needs-based school funding is the key starting point for turning around our country's less than impressive recent educational performance.

But getting vulnerable young Australians off to the right start isn't just about arriving at a fairer education funding model – as important as that is.

It's *how* we spend our educational resources that will ultimately make the difference.

Education funding has increased over the past two decades with demonstrably limited return in terms of improved literacy and numeracy for our most disadvantaged young people.

Our systems and constitutional arrangements have struggled to provide the continuum of support that is required by vulnerable children, young people and their families.

This clearly has to change.

Create new models for schooling

Whether by increased autonomy or full-blown independence, Australia's public schools are likely to experience dramatic changes in terms of their responsibilities in the years ahead.

Some schools – particularly schools in disadvantaged areas – are less able to take advantage of the benefits of a move to greater autonomy:

For example, they have more limited human and community resources, so are vulnerable to devolved governance arrangements.

Or they have difficulties attracting quality Principals and staff, so are vulnerable when autonomy place more demands on them, including the need for specialised expertise.

The Smith Family has devised a model for successful school-community partnerships that, we believe, offers a way of supporting schools as they tread down the path to greater autonomy.

Under The Smith Family Hub model, we act as a broker across a number of schools and other local stakeholders – business, government, community agencies and health providers – to more efficiently direct resources to support the retention and achievement of children in education.

The starting point towards improving the educational achievement and retention of individual students has to be about harnessing the strengths and assets of the entire school community and co-ordinating them in a way which is focused on sharing goals and outcomes.

With support from the federal and state governments, philanthropists, universities and businesses, we have already established five Smith Family Hubs around the country – in Wyndham, Morwell and Lakes Entrance in Victoria, in the Swan area of Western Australia and most recently in Launceston in Tasmania.

Early outcomes suggest they are a very effective model for supporting disadvantaged students and their families.

But they're not a short-term fix – nothing is when we're dealing with big gaps in educational achievement.

Therefore we need to fund these initiatives – not for one or two years – but more likely for five or 10 years.

Doing so demands both new governance and more flexible and funding arrangements that facilitate new ways of working across sectors.

‘Picking some winners – student2student’

Across Australia there are hundreds of individual programs and pilots aimed at addressing educational disadvantage – all well-intentioned – but which ones actually work?

We need to ‘pick some winners’. Choose programs that have evidence behind them and find ways to scale them up nationally.

Implementing programs at scale is a key challenge but unless we master it, effective programs will remain too costly and ineffective programs will continue to drain our resources.

For example, *student2student* is a Smith Family program we run in 75 communities which aims to improve the reading skills of children in Years 3 to 8 – with a reading age up to two years behind their chronological age – by matching them with trained reading buddies who are at least two years older.

Student2student runs over an 18 week period with the pair connecting over the phone two to three times a week, for at least 20 minutes at a time. The student reads to their buddy over the phone from books provided by The Smith Family which are appropriate to their reading level.

The results are impressive.

A major study of 742 participants in *student2student* has revealed that 93 per cent improved their reading with two-thirds boosting their reading age by more than six months.

Student2student is by any measure a success. It’s achieving terrific results and addressing one of the key gaps in education performance between disadvantaged and advantaged kids – reading skills.

Even better it’s doing so in an affordable way (\$1100 per child).

We’ve called on federal and state/territory governments – along with corporate Australia – to co-operate in the expansion of *student2student* to help improve the reading skills of disadvantaged young Australians.

We know that if we can increase the reading skills of disadvantaged children and young people we can also assist with improving health outcomes among the same group.

Conclusion

It is fundamental that we as a nation set ourselves the collective goal of an educational system which is high performing by international standards.

However, equally important are the goals of equity and excellence for Australian schooling – and here we clearly have some challenges.

The foundations of a civilised country are built on all citizens having access to and receiving a comprehensive education.

From The Smith Family’s experience, many young Australians are currently being shut out from that opportunity.

It not only impacts on them but it diminishes us all and threatens our future productivity, social cohesion and leads to long-term poor health and the need for costly health responses.

We have a great deal of work ahead of us if we’re going to turn this situation around and we look forward to working across sectors to achieve this.

