Good Shepherd
Youth & Family Service

JESUIT SOCIAL SERVICES
BUILDING A JUST SOCIETY

MacKillop Family Services

"I JUST WANT TO GO TO SCHOOL"

Voices of young people experiencing educational disadvantage

I Just Want to Go to School:
Voices of Young People Experiencing Educational Disadvantage

A Research Project by Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Jesuit Social Services and MacKillop Family Services, 2012

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we would like to acknowledge the young people who generously gave up their time in order to share their stories with us. Without their input, this project would not have been possible. Not only are their stories engaging, but they also raise possible solutions to the problem of educational disadvantage.

Preface

This report draws together evidence from a range of sources, including current policy and research, a group of experts from education sectors, and, most importantly, the voices of 13 young people, telling their stories of educational disadvantage.

Here are the recommendations arising from those combined sources.

Recommendations

Better Strategies to Tackle Bullying and Violence

— **RECOMMENDATION 1**

Schools should be supported to provide strong prevention, early intervention and holistic responses to student wellbeing issues, including bullying and mental health issues.

Promoting Equal Access to Learning Experiences

— **RECOMMENDATION 2**

The State and Commonwealth governments should provide financial support to families to facilitate full participation in, and equitable access to, all school activities and excursions. This includes providing the Education Maintenance Allowance to low income families at a level commensurate with actual education costs.

— **RECOMMENDATION 3**

The State and Commonwealth governments should provide schools with funding for learning and teaching requirements in full, including the materials and processes that are part of structured learning activities including access to information technology, camps and excursions.

— **RECOMMENDATION 4**

Schools should conduct "equity audits" as part of their development and management of high quality education delivery. These equity audits should be based on the Standpoint audit tool.[1]

Providing Additional Learning Assistance Within and Outside School

— **RECOMMENDATION 5**

Schools should provide additional forms of assistance to facilitate learning and participation for all students, with proactive measures to engage students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This includes the provision of additional classroom helpers, English as a Second Language supports and homework clubs.

Greater Consultation about Young People's Educational Needs

— RECOMMENDATION 6

Schools should utilise effective engagement strategies to ensure that young people and their parents and carers are engaged with their school and community and have a meaningful voice in school decision-making and policy direction and development.

— RECOMMENDATION 7

Schools should be resourced to allow students greater democratic and cultural expression within their schools and to ensure genuine consultation with their students.

Recognising Young People's Individual Needs and Circumstances

— RECOMMENDATION 8

Schools and State and Commonwealth governments should develop, implement and evaluate strategies to support a range of learning styles. This should include vocational and practice based learning, including practical approaches to theoretical learning and a commitment to ongoing support for the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning.

— RECOMMENDATION 9

Schools should recognise the diversity of needs, background and strengths that young people bring to their learning and the school culture, including resilience, optimism and hope.

— RECOMMENDATION 10

Schools should implement individualised learning approaches for vulnerable and disadvantaged students, in line with their responsibility to engage with all students. As described in the 'Effective Schools Are Engaging Schools' guidelines, Individual Learning Plans are critical to ensuring young people achieve. However, they need to be implemented, monitored, reviewed and revised if they are to be effective for young people.

Better Understanding of the Range of Issues Young People Face

— RECOMMENDATION 11

The State and Commonwealth Governments should provide resources to ensure that schools are forging positive and ongoing partnerships with community agencies, to contribute to the wellbeing of their students. In relation to students living in out-of-home-care, this includes the strengthening of the regional Partnering Agreement Contacts to open dialogue and support cross-sector understanding. In line with the 'Partnership Agreement between the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Victorian Community Sector 2010–2014', community liaison should occur with agencies including out-of-home care, family/parenting, adolescent mental health, financial support and emergency relief services and providers.

— RECOMMENDATION 12

Education policy should recognise that schools need to be a 'safe space' offering security, stability and a holistic learning environment. This is particularly critical for vulnerable children and young people.

Supporting Alternative Education Settings

— RECOMMENDATION 13

Alternative education settings should be supported to ensure they remain integrated, robust alternatives to mainstream education settings. Although they should provide a range of means for engagement (for example, physical activity, art and performance), they should also provide a full curriculum taught in ways to engage students within that setting.

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[1] The Standpoint Project is a partnership between Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Victoria University and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. This project looks at the ways in which schools can better support the learning of students from low-income families. Essentially, it "asks teachers to stand in the shoes of the most disadvantaged students and see what education looks like" from their perspective (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2010). In order to facilitate this inquiry, the project developed the 'Low Income Awareness Checklist' (Kruger 2009). Teams of teachers used the checklist and other resources developed by The Standpoint Project to develop practical descriptions of their experiences working with students from low-income families. Participating teachers also set up small-scale innovations within their school that were designed to stimulate deeper educational engagement with the least advantaged students (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2010).

Chapter 1
Introduction

Knowledge is always shaped collaboratively. The three organisations that initiated this project—Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Jesuit Social Services and MacKillop Family Services ('the research partners')—came together to make a contribution to our understanding of educational disadvantage.

The term 'educational disadvantage' is used here to refer to the phenomenon in which certain groups of young people in our community derive less benefit from the education system than their peers. Young people can be excluded from full participation in the education system for a range of reasons. However, the overarching theme in the area of educational disadvantage is poverty. A substantial volume of research indicates that young people from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds and communities are more likely to underachieve in the education system than their peers from higher income backgrounds. Educational disadvantage is also considered to be a key factor that perpetuates intergenerational poverty (Combat Poverty Agency 2003).

It is now widely acknowledged that educational disadvantage is an unfortunate reality of the Australian school system. This was brought into sharp focus by the *Review of Funding for Schooling—Final Report* (commissioned by the Commonwealth Government and led by Chair, David Gonski AC) (the 'Gonski Report'). The Gonski Report highlighted the need for governments, schools and policy-makers to find new ways to address educational disadvantage.

We believe the starting point for engaging with the problem of educational disadvantage is listening to the voices of young people themselves. With this in mind, this project set out to catalogue the stories of young people experiencing educational disadvantage. 'Digital storytelling' was identified as an appropriate method of doing this. Digital storytelling offers young people the opportunity to tell their own stories as a creative and potentially empowering process. The stories are recorded and narrated to a backdrop of images that relate to the key themes articulated by the young people. In the context of developing a range of technical skills, the young people write their own stories, choose images and retain control over the process.

In turn, digital storytelling offers the audience the opportunity to engage with the young person directly. By listening to the voice of the young person telling their own story in their own words, we cannot help but connect with that young person and, with the broader problem of educational disadvantage.

This project catalogued the digital stories of 13 young people who had experienced educational disadvantage. The stories are available on the research partners' websites:

— Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service http://www.goodshepvic.org.au/

— Jesuit Social Services http://www.jss.org.au/

— MacKillop Family Services http://www.mackillop.org.au/

We strongly encourage you to listen to these young people's stories and share in the wisdom they have to offer.

Background to the Project

In 2010, the research partners commissioned a project to create digital recordings of the stories of young people and their experiences of educational disadvantage. This collaboration was part of a broader advocacy and research alliance grounded in each agency's history of working with vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people. A governance group, which was made up of the Chief Executive Officers of each of the organisations (or their delegates) was established to steer the project.

The project was funded by the research partners.

Aims of the Project

The research partners set out to gain an understanding of the difficulties young people from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds face at school. From the joint experience of the agencies, there was an understanding that student engagement in education is not universal. Many young people miss out on meaningful life chances because of the challenges they face at school. This project aimed to gain an insight into these challenges and to give young people a forum for raising concerns directly, in their own words. It is anticipated that the stories will be used as an advocacy strategy, to inform educational policy in Victoria and beyond.

Importantly, the project also aimed to develop the digital literacy skills of young people involved.

What Is Digital Storytelling?

Central to digital storytelling is the idea of combining the art of telling stories with a variety of digital multimedia, such as images, audio and video. As is the case with traditional storytelling, digital stories focus on a chosen theme (in this case, educational disadvantage) and often contain a particular viewpoint (such as the viewpoint of a young person). The stories are typically a few minutes long and have a variety of uses, including the telling of personal tales, the recounting of events, or as a means to inform or advocate around a particular topic (Robin 2006).

Why Digital Storytelling?

The research partners approached this project with the aim of conducting participatory research. As the project was about educational disadvantage — being *excluded* from the school experience — it seemed fitting that the methodology for this research was as inclusive and empowering as possible. In particular, the research partners wanted, through the project, to give young people the opportunity to tell their stories in their own words. The benefits of using participatory methodology are outlined by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) in their 2011 monograph, *Their Voice*. In this work, the Centre explains that involving children and young people in participatory methodologies legitimises their lived experiences and acknowledges them as experts on issues that matter to them:

Involving children as participants in a participative process provides for shared understanding and co-construction of meaning — the meaning that the world holds for

them and its implication for the policies, programs and decisions that impact them ... Compared to the artificiality of an adult world, a participative approach that gives children control over the process and methods used to include them better recognises the child's perspective, is more in tune with children's ways of seeing and is better able to relate to the child's world. (Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare 2011, p.15)

With these benefits in mind, the governance group explored the possibilities of using a participatory methodology using narrative. Dr Lea Campbell, the project's researcher, gathered information from other relevant initiatives. She consulted the storytelling project worker from the Centre for the Human Rights of Imprisoned People (a project of Flat Out), who had undertaken a project with women subject to youth detention, policing, surveillance, community-based orders and/or prison. She also consulted the research officer from AHURI-RMIT who had undertaken a podcast project of children and young people living in out-of-home care in collaboration with the Salvation Army — Making it Work: Stories of Living and Leaving the Care of the State (AHURI-RMIT 2010).

At the same time as this exploratory work was taking place, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) was implementing a policy in schools to encourage the increased use of the 'ultranet' to communicate within the school community. Critics viewed this policy as having the potential to exclude some students and their families, especially those without access to computers or lacking technical literacy. The governance group identified that the use of digital media may be a useful vehicle to provide a group of young people with access to technology as part of the narrative advocacy process. In this way, the governance group linked ideas of digital exclusion and participatory methodology through narrative to develop the idea of a digital storytelling project.

Digital storytelling is particularly well suited to the needs and strengths of young people who are disengaged from the educational system (Podkalicka and Campbell 2010). In particular, digital storytelling has the potential to be:

— an inclusive research strategy that enables multiple skills and senses to be engaged. The fact that digital storytelling does not solely rely on the written word can make it more comfortable for less literate or engaged students;

— attractive to young people as it engages them in digital technologies that are often viewed by young people as being fun and relevant to their lives;

— a way of imparting visual, digital and information literacy by teaching young people how to produce and interpret digital stories themselves (Robin 2006);

— a powerful tool to tell stories both visually and aurally. This personal approach can work as a powerful advocacy strategy; and

— a way of familiarising participants with digital ways of engaging in public policy debates. This reflects the Commonwealth Government's preference for reshaping citizens' and public servants' relationships digitally (Government 2.0 Taskforce Report 2009). This is particularly important given that children and young people have very little influence over the policy, research and practice decisions made about them (Fitzgerald 2009; Gallagher 2006; Rose 1999).

However, as Dr Kate Bishop notes, there are a number of ethical and practical complexities involved in any participatory research. Dr Bishop states that these complexities:

may not lead to particularly positive experiences for children and young people — or to identifiable benefits. Well before reaching the point where children and young people become involved in a research exercise, there are many processes that undermine the potential benefit of research to children and young people as well as minimising the access children and young people may have to participate in research. Processes such as obtaining ethics approval, recruitment and consent have enormous power over the research that is conducted and power over which groups of children can participate and in what capacity. (Bishop 2008, p. 28)

In his contribution to the Experts' Views section of this report, James Tonson, Victorian Student Representative and Council Coordinator from 2006 to 2009, talks about deep listening to students. He says that deep listening is needed to hear "the spirit of the message, not just the words", of young people. Tonson also emphasises the need to create participatory structures for students:

This process is about freeing students stuck in a role of "voicelessness" and helping them to learn a new role — that of the empowered partner... We adults have to give up our self-righteous monopoly on "knowledge" and "experience".

In light of these complexities, and the young people's potentially vulnerabilities, it was vital that the project address these ethical dilemmas before undertaking the project.

Ethical Framework

The governance group invested time in planning the methodology for this project to ensure that it was ethically and practically sound. Ethics approvals were sought and obtained from:

— The Department of Human Services' Children Youth and Families Division, Research Coordinating Committee;

— Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service Research Ethics Committee; and

— MacKillop Family Services Quality and Advocacy Committee.

The project adopted a staged process for obtaining consent. Both the young people and their parents/guardians needed to provide consent for participation in the project, followed by consent to release the stories. As one parent could not be contacted for this second round of consent (it is understood they had left Australia), their child's story was not included in this report. All other young people and their parents/guardians (where relevant) provided consent for the stories to be released.

Obtaining appropriate consent was one of the difficult aspects of this research. For example, one support worker who assisted with this process noted:

> I found it difficult to get consent forms signed within the timeframes. However, this is an issue that's difficult to resolve due to the background of the young people involved and the ongoing diffi-culties — conflict, language and education barriers, mental health, drug and alcohol issues — that their guardians (being parents, grandparents, kin) experience. There were also some difficulties getting child protection to give consent. However, once the details of confidentiality were explained, they eventually consented.

The particular difficulties of obtaining consent with children involved with the child protection system has been acknowledged in other projects:

> A major issue for us in engaging children collaboratively in this research was the tension between developing methods for sharing power, or control, with children in institutionalised, asymmetrical adult–child relations. This tension ... is particularly relevant when researching with children located in the child welfare, out-of-home care system. The researcher who wishes to engage with children in care as research participants must negotiate with gatekeepers at several layers in hierarchically-ordered network, in which the child is at the lowest level. (Mason 2009, p. 91)

The governance group recognised that involving young people was key to the success of this project, and in spite of the difficulties posed by numerous ethics and consent processes, they persevered through this stage. The support and youth workers who had been involved in recruitment and support at the workshops were again called upon to assist with the processes related to obtaining consent to release the stories post production. This included having the young people and their parents/guardians attend at agency offices to watch the stories and determine whether or not they were prepared to provide consent for release.

An important aspect of the ethical framework for this project was to ensure that the research protected the safety and privacy of all of the young people who shared their stories. Therefore, this report uses pseudonyms to refer to the young people, and all potentially identifying information has been removed from their stories.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited from each of the research partner's agencies. The agencies' support and youth workers, in particular, MacKillop Family Services' Journeys program staff and Jesuit Social Service's Artful Dodgers Studios' staff, were heavily involved in recruiting young people from their programs. The recruitment process involved workers selecting a sample of young people from a range of backgrounds, talking about the project and asking if they would like to be involved. One support worker noted that this required a long term commitment from the young people which created some difficulties for those who struggled with longer-term planning.

In addition, support workers assisted with recruitment by providing transport to and from the workshops and also provided support and encouragement throughout the process. However, one support worker observed that — even with this level of support — it was still difficult to get young people to attend a workshop on a Saturday:

> The problem for us was the inflexible time arrangements. It's all about access. We had one Saturday workshop ... Seriously, it was too difficult. We can hardly manage to get the young people to school, so this project was way out on a branch. Shame, really.

In line with other projects of this kind, recruiting participants was reported as being the most difficult and time-consuming element of the project (see, for example, Moore, McArthur and Noble-Carr 2009, and Wise 2009). Additionally, young people

can withdraw consent to participate simply by not attending. This created challenges for the project team as it was sometimes unclear until the day of the workshop how many participants would attend.

Fourteen people were recruited to participate in the workshops: seven people who were over 18 years of age and seven people who were under 18 years of age.

Staff

This project was resource intensive. A number of staff members were required to encourage the young people's involvement in the project and to ensure that the young people were supported to attend workshops. In relation to the storytelling elements, some participants received additional assistance from their support workers to plan or write their stories prior to the workshop. This support is described as "scaffolding" in participatory research, whereby the participants are provided with supports to fully contribute to the research process (Fitzgerald and Graham 2009). Scaffolding is an important component of conducting participatory research in a well-planned and ethical manner.

Workshops

The young people who were recruited to take part in this project attended a series of workshops to narrate and record their experiences of education. There were no more than five participants in each workshop, along with up to five staff at the Artful Dodgers Studios. Young people attended the workshops for five hours and were transported to and from the workshop by support staff. On the day, the young people received catering, a thank you voucher and a certificate of attendance outlining the skills attained. Some agencies also provided other incentives for participants including a go-carting trip and pamper sessions.

Prior to the workshops, the young people wrote stories with their support workers. Some also completed artwork and took photos to illustrate their stories. The storytelling aspect of the project took place following a series of preparatory exercises and support within the workshops.

The workshops were very tightly structured to allow for warm-up, write-up, production of voiceovers, instruction in software use, searching creative commons pictures and to take breaks. There was no script, no creative boundary nor set expectations as to what the final product would be, other than being somewhat related to their school experiences. Most of the written stories were around 400 words

in length. The workshop mixture of structure and flexibility meant that breaks were possible and could be taken at any time. Likewise, this structure accommodated different literacy skills and personalities and enabled participants to genuinely choose how they wished to engage with the process.

Each workshop involved both individualised and group learning. The young people were instructed on cyber safety, digital literacy and the role of video, performance and spoken narrative. This included a discussion on the elements of a good story (economy and length, creative writing with tensions or challenges to overcome and personalising a story). The young people also learnt how to select and visually manipulate images. They operated iMovie software, created voiceovers and searched for digital images they wanted for their stories from the photo-sharing website 'Flickr'.

Support staff reported that it was important to check in with participants frequently during the workshops. This included asking how participants were going and telling them they were able to withdraw from the project if the process became overwhelming.

At the end of the workshops, some participants commented that the process was well worth their time and thanked staff for organising the workshop and enabling them to make their voices heard. They related to the digital medium immediately and felt that being 'heard' was an empowering experience. They appreciated expressing their viewpoints in an uncensored way.

For some young people, it was the first time that others had sat down, listened to and acknowledged their experiences at school. Support workers reported that some participants found it particularly powerful to share their completed stories with each other. This gave their stories and participation in the process important validation. The young people were keen to share their insights with future generations, and some told their stories in the form of advice.

For other young people, it was confronting to listen to their own voice recordings. Support workers described this as being one of the most challenging elements of the research process. For example, one participant said she was 'over it' and asked to leave a little earlier, which was accommodated. On this note, both Bessell (2009) and Bishop (2009) argue for the importance of allowing for 'informed dissent' in participatory methodologies involving children and young people. Other young people chose to stay on and talk with other participants and staff. The openness and authenticity of the process and the

solid relationships the young people had with the workers helped to create a sense of validation.

At the end of each workshop, some participants and staff would listen to the stories that had just been created, acknowledging the work behind the stories as well as the stories themselves. The researcher reported that it was at times overwhelming to listen to the stories and humbling to witness the resolve of the young people in sharing them.

Feedback on Involvement

Feedback was sought from the support and youth workers involved in the project, some of whom still have a support relationship with the young people who shared their stories. The support workers reported that the young people enjoyed the workshops and the opportunity to learn computer and software skills. One worker reported that the process helped to motivate some young people to return to education.

Support workers also reported that being involved in research was less important for some participants than the opportunity to learn new skills. However, other young people were interested that their stories would be used for advocacy purposes and have been proud that their stories have already been used in international conferences on young people living in out-of-home care and engaging young people in research. Others expressed scepticism that their stories could really make a difference.

Experts' Views

To build a fuller picture of educational disadvantage, the project sought the views of a number of experts in the fields of education and educational engagement. The views of the experts are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of the research partners. However, the experts' views informed the development of this report and are weaved throughout.

The experts' views cover a range of significant issues relating to education, and represent the perspectives of different stakeholders in the school system, including a parent of three school-aged children, academics and educational representatives. They can be found in full at Appendix 2.

Current Policy Context

The Victorian Government has implemented a number of key initiatives aimed at overcoming some of the issues raised by the young people in this project. For example, changes have occurred in relation to the allocation of Student Resource Packages, the Youth Partnership trial projects and the Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment.

The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs' *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* includes a commitment to act on improving educational outcomes for Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

At the Commonwealth level, the most recent examination of equity and schools, the Gonski Report, states:

> Australia's schools, government and non-government, should be staffed with the very best principals and teachers, those who feel empowered to lead and drive change, and create opportunities for students to learn in new ways to meet their individual needs. Classrooms should support innovative approaches to learning, not only through the curriculum, technologies and infrastructure, but also through the culture of the school. Principals and teachers should encourage a culture of high expectations, continuous learning, and independence and responsibility for all students. They should also forge connections with parents and the community, as key partners in children's learning and attitudes to school. (p. xix)

To this end, the Gonski Report has made a series of recommendations to deliver schools funding in different ways, with the aim of reducing educational disadvantage. The Commonwealth Government has committed to taking the Gonski Report's recommendations to the states and territories for further discussion. Importantly, the Report confirms precisely what the young people in our research revealed to us — that socioeconomic status should not adversely impact on their access to a high quality education.

Implementation of the Victorian school engagement policy for vulnerable and disadvantaged young people has been piecemeal. The 'School Focussed Youth Service' and the 'Effective Schools are Engaging Schools' initiatives have not been committed to in full.

Chapter 2
Educational Disadvantage: An Overview

This section of the report provides a framework to consider the digital stories produced by the young people who took part in this project. It highlights factors which contribute to educational disadvantage, some of which were experienced by the young people.

This section is also informed by Associate Professor Pamela Snow, Monash University, whose contribution to the Experts' Views section of this report asks whether fixing educational disadvantage should be confined to education policy, or whether overcoming inequity more broadly should be the focus.

Getting an Education: From Principles to Practice

Education is consistently identified as the most important pathway out of poverty and disadvantage. It is well established that higher levels of education are linked to higher employment rates and higher average earnings (Landvogt 2011). As Tony Vinson concludes in *Dropping off the Edge: The Distribution of Disadvantage in Australia:*

> At many points the project's findings remind us of the importance of completing school education in overcoming or avoiding disadvantage. (Vinson 2007, p. 98)

Education carries enormous benefits for nations as well as individuals. On average, one additional year of education can increase the gross domestic product by three to six per cent (Landvogt 2011). Although education should not be viewed as a commodity, there is a clear economic impetus for investing in education.

The importance of education is also recognised in international law. The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (the Convention) affirms that all young people have the right to access a good quality education and should be encouraged to attain the highest level of schooling they can. Education should help them to develop their talents and abilities to their fullest potential. The Convention confirms that, in light of the importance of education, governments have a duty to ensure that disadvantaged young people have access to schooling. As part of this duty, governments may need to provide financial assistance to students who need it.

In recent years, two key policy documents have put the spotlight on Australia's schooling system. In 2008, the Australian Government and state and territory education ministers released the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*. The Melbourne Declaration sets out the national policy framework for Australian schools over the next 10 years. Its goals focus on promoting equity and excellence in schooling and on young Australians becoming successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens.

The goals set out in the Melbourne Declaration are commendable. However, the gap between these goals and the realities of our education system were brought into sharp focus in 2011 by the Gonski Report which found that, over the last decade, there has been an overall decline in Australian students' levels of achievement. In addition to this declining performance across the board, the Gonski Report raised concerns that:

> Australia has a significant gap between its highest and lowest performing students. This performance gap is far greater in Australia than in many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, particularly those with high-performing schooling systems. A concerning proportion of Australia's lowest performing students are not meeting minimum standards of achievement. There is also an unacceptable link between low levels of achievement and educational disadvantage, particularly among students from low socioeconomic and Indigenous backgrounds. (Australian Government 2011, p. xiii)

The Gonski Report highlighted that educational disadvantage is an undesirable feature of the Australian schooling system. Some of the facets of this problem are explored in further detail below.

Poverty

Australia is acknowledged to be one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Despite the softening of the global economy, Australia's financial forecast continues to look positive (Cornell 2012). However, not all Australian families are included in this economic prosperity. Many families continue to live below the poverty line, and research shows that the gap between rich and poor is growing (Wicks 2005). This increasing inequality in Australian society is having a pronounced effect on our children. Around one in six children lives in poverty in Australia (ACOSS 2012). Compared with most other industrialised countries, this rate is high. The detrimental effects of poverty on young people's educational participation and outcomes are well documented. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more prone to have health problems that impact on their education, including behavioural difficulties and mental health issues (Scutella and Smyth 2005). Without the right support, young people who grow up in poverty are likely to show lower levels of achievement at school (McDonald et al 2008). Those with low literacy and numeracy skills have a greater chance of leaving school at an early age and being unemployed in later life (ARACY 2008).

School is one of the key settings in which young people become aware of — and keenly feel the effects of — poverty. It is through contact with their peers in the school environment that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds begin to sense the difference of their situation (McDonald et al 2008). For these young people, 'missing out' is a common experience. The digital stories in this report highlights, students from disadvantaged backgrounds may have to miss out on essential items such as textbooks, school excursions and even food

to eat for lunch. Due to this material deprivation, students can find it difficult to engage with the education system and may become ostracised — and even bullied — by their peers (Davies et al 2008).

Costs of Education

Strategies to engage the most marginalised students in school must include removing cost barriers to education. Despite the continuing rhetoric of 'free' education, the 'user pays' approach to schooling is fast becoming the norm:

> Low socioeconomic status families are faced with ever-more normalised requests to pay ever-increasing amounts in ever-more disadvantaged schools. (Landvogt 2011, p. 13)

There has been a steady increase in education costs for a number of years, with secondary school costs rising the most (Landvogt 2011). This increase in costs impacts disproportionately on low-income families (Smallwood et al 2002). Many families have difficulty meeting the basic costs of their children's education. In addition, they struggle to pay for activities such as sport, recreation and camps (Bond and Horn 2007). These activities tend to be treated as 'extras' by schools when, in fact, they are critical strategies for engaging disenfranchised students in education.

Specific Needs

There are high rates of educational disadvantage among students who:

— are Indigenous

— come from sole-parent families

— are from refugee backgrounds

— experience mental health issues

— experience homelessness

— live in out-of-home care.

The specific circumstances of these young people are discussed below.

INDIGENOUS YOUNG PEOPLE

Indigenous young people are among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable populations in Australia. They continue to be affected by a legacy of historical policies and practices of dispossession, assimilation and the removal from family, land, culture and language. Indigenous people in Victoria are also the most greatly affected by the legacy of the Stolen Generations (Victorian Government Indigenous Affairs Report 2010-11).

As indicated previously, poverty is a key predictor for negative education outcomes in young people.

Poverty, combined with other factors including intergenerational trauma and grief, has led to poorer outcomes for Indigenous people across a range of areas including education, health and employment. (Victorian Government Indigenous Affairs Report 2010-11).

A range of policies and program have been implemented at Commonwealth and state levels in response to these issues. In 2007, the Council of Australian Governments committed to six ambitious targets to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage, two of which relate to education: halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children within a decade, and halving the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 attainment rates or equivalent attainment by 2020.

However, as noted by Rosa McKenna, Director of Communication in Education and Training Pty Ltd, in her contribution to this report, structural disadvantage and systemic issues persist in reducing the ability for Indigenous young people to engage with education. These include systemic or structural racism, lack of understanding or interest in engaging and working with young Indigenous people and their communities, and a lack of acknowledgement, respect and usage of Indigenous ways of knowing and doing.

As the Gonski Report highlighted, achieving improvements in Indigenous education will require appropriate and sustained levels of funding. It will also require more rigorous and transparent data collection methods as far as the educational achievement levels of Indigenous students are concerned (Australian Government 2011).

YOUNG PEOPLE FROM SOLE PARENT FAMILIES

Sole parent families account for approximately one-fifth of all families with children who are under 15 years of age. The majority of these families (87 per cent) are headed by women. More than half rely on Centrelink payments as their principal source of income (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007). In Australia, there is a strong association between sole parenthood and child poverty (which is not the case in all industrialised countries) (McDonald 2008). Sole parents in Australia are likely to experience difficulties such as being unable to pay a bill, cutting down on essential items such as heating or going without food (Gallet 2010). They are also likely to struggle to meet the costs of their children's education.

There is a complex relationship between a young person's family structure and their educational outcomes. Simply coming from a sole parent family does not mean that a young person will

fare poorly at school. Indeed, many young people from sole parent families achieve high educational outcomes. However, the key predictor here is poverty. Research from the United Kingdom has shown that "part, if not all" of the negative effects of sole parenthood on young people's educational outcomes is due to the "fewer economic resources available in such families" (Centre for Economic Policy Research, undated). Given the nexus between poverty and sole parenthood in Australia, this finding is concerning. It underscores the fact that sole parent families in Australia require additional support to enable their children to effectively engage in the education system.

YOUNG PEOPLE FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS
Refugees come from diverse backgrounds and cultures. However, they share common histories of oppression, loss and — more often than not — trauma. Prior to arriving in Australia, they may have undergone significant disruptions to their education (Benhadya 2010). Once in Australia, they may find it challenging to engage in school due to factors such as:

— disrupted schooling

— low levels of English language skills

— poverty

— illness

— discrimination and racism

— the impact of torture and trauma

— living in a family environment that has been fractured due to the refugee experience

— being an unaccompanied minor without family support (Refugee Education Partnership Project 2007).

In spite of these challenges, 'getting a good education' can be the single most important goal for young people from refugee backgrounds in their early settlement years in Australia (Gifford et al 2009). In order to assist students from refugee backgrounds, Victorian schools host a range of English as a Second Language programs, as well as additional supports such as bridging and transition programs and multicultural education aides (DEECD 2008). In addition, the DEECD has developed partnerships with various organisations to provide learning support programmes ('homework programs') and cross-sectoral approaches to the education needs of young refugees (DEECD 2008). Nonetheless, the Refugee Council of Australia has noted that there are significant variations between schools in the levels of specialised support available to students from refugee backgrounds. They have advised that this problem is likely to continue unless

Australia develops a national refugee education strategy (Refugee Council of Australia 2012).

YOUNG PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES
Approximately one in four young people in Australia has experienced mental health issues. A further one in four young people has experienced "moderate to high levels of psychological stress" (Australian Government, Office for Youth 2009, p. 17). Young people who experience mental health issues are likely to have lower self-esteem and more difficulties engaging in school than their peers (Sawyer et al 2000).

According to Sawyer et al, school-based counsellors and medical practitioners provide the services that are most frequently used by young people with mental health issues. However, only one out of every four young people with mental health issues receives professional help for their problems. In part, this is because young people with mental health issues rarely seek help for themselves. Instead, it is teachers or parents who commonly decide whether a young person should be referred for help (Sawyer et al 2000). This indicates that schools have the potential to provide targeted early interventions for young people who are experiencing mental health issues. This is particularly important in light of the growing body of evidence that suggests that providing mental health assistance in educational settings can promote higher levels of academic achievement for young people (Response Ability 2009).

YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE HOMELESS
In 2009, the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) reported nearly 6,500 young Victorians between the ages of 12 and 24 had nowhere to call home. They include people who are 'sleeping rough' (that is, sleeping outside or in impoverished dwellings), couch-surfing with friends or relatives, and staying in crisis or temporary accommodation. A significant number of these young people cite family violence, abuse and neglect as the reasons for their homelessness (CHP 2010).

The educational outcomes for young homeless people are not promising. In 2001, only 33 per cent of young homeless people aged 12 to 18 were attending school. Eight per cent were attending TAFE colleges and one per cent were working full-time (CHP et al 2007). These figures indicate that the current education system is failing to meet the needs of young homeless people. The CHP has emphasised that schools and governments must work more collaboratively with supported accommodation and assistance providers if they are to meet their aim of increasing the numbers of young homeless people who are engaged in education (CHP et al 2007).

Across Australia, the number of children and young people living in out-of-home care was just over 37,500 on 30 June 2011. (Australian Institute of Heath and Welfare 2012). Children and young people who live away from their families are known to experience a range of disadvantages that can impact on their educational outcomes, including:

— the effects of trauma (Wise et al 2010)

— instability in school, including multiple school changes and disruptions to schooling

— problems fitting in and making friends at school

— limited educational participation, for example, not attending school, attending part-time, truanting, suspension and exclusion

— lower academic attainment and aspirations

— repeating grades

— financial barriers to accessing further education (Working Group on Education for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in Queensland 2011).

The groundbreaking 2010 study by Anglicare Victoria and Wesley Mission Victoria, *Care-System Impacts on Academic Outcomes*, set out a number of recommendations aimed at promoting positive outcomes for young people in out-of home care. These included increasing the capacity of mainstream schools to respond to trauma-related behaviour and improving the scale and reach of evidence-based alternative education programmes. The research also called for better coordination between the education and out-of-home care systems (Wise et al 2010).

Educational Disadvantage: What Is the Way Forward?

As has been made clear in this overview, educational disadvantage is an unfortunate reality of the Australian schooling system. The practical effect of this phenomenon is that, across Australia, "students from disadvantaged backgrounds are consistently achieving educational outcomes lower than their peers" (Australian Government 2011, p. 105). The Gonski Report brings this problem to national attention and — importantly — also points to the way forward. Essentially, the Gonski Report proposes a system in which money is apportioned to schools based on educational need (Carney 2012). According to the Gonski Report, this will require resources to be targeted towards supporting the most disadvantaged students and the most disadvantaged schools (Australian Government 2011). If implemented, this new funding model would help to ensure that every student — regardless of their background — would receive a high quality education and, in turn, the best chance of leading a fulfilling and productive life.[2]

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[2] At the time of printing, the model for the implementation of reforms proposed in the Gonski Report is unclear. It is understood that the Commonwealth Government broadly embraces the Gonski Report, however there is no agreement as yet to the level of implementation or reforms to funding between Commonwealth and State governments.

"SOMETIMES I WAGGED SCHOOL SO THAT PEOPLE AT SCHOOL WOULDN'T FIGHT ME." [GUY]

Chapter 3
**Project Findings:
What the Young
People Told Us**

The stories of the young people who took part in this project identified a number of key factors inhibiting their educational engagement, including:

— bullying and violence

— unequal access to learning experiences

— need for additional learning assistance within and outside school

— no 'voice' or consultation about educational needs

— not being adequately recognised as an individual, with distinct learning and other needs

— little understanding of the range of issues young people face (for example, mental health issues, bullying, living in out-of-home care, poverty, abuse from parents)

— dissatisfaction with some aspects of alternative education settings.

These issues are discussed in further detail below.

Bullying and Violence

> I'm not going to school anymore because of bullies. — 'MADISON'[3]

> Sometimes I wagged school so that people at school wouldn't fight me. — 'GUY'

Many of the young people recorded experiences of violence and bullying as part of their schooling story. Some also talked about a lack of adequate support and intervention from their school when they sought assistance.

The young people said being a victim of bullying, with other experiences of trauma, led to their disengagement from school. Young people told us that schools need to provide effective responses to complaints of violence and bullying. They said it was especially important to support young people who make complaints and equally important was not to dismiss or ignore incidents of bullying and violence.

Unequal Access to Learning Experiences

> … [A]t mainstream school you had to pay six dollars or something for excursions and I could never pay. I'd have to go and sit with the year below me because my whole year would go on the excursion. I felt poor. It sucked. — 'ANNA'

Some young people told us that they missed out on school excursions and extracurricular activities because the costs of these were prohibitive. These young people missed out on valuable opportunities for learning experiences and new environments. The young people we spoke to said that this situation was unfair and resulted in them feeling stigmatised.

This is supported by Professor Richard Teese, University of Melbourne, in his contribution to the Experts' Views section, in which he says:

> The purpose of school is not to mirror divisions in society, but to respect and cultivate the moral being of every child.

Need for Additional Learning Assistance Within and Outside School

> I had a lot of trouble with homework because I was always getting into trouble so I was never in class so I didn't understand the work or homework that was given as homework. Even though I was in trouble, if I had extra help, like a tutor, it would have helped. — 'KEVIN'

The young people we spoke to told us that they would have benefitted from additional assistance within mainstream settings. A couple of young people identified that extra classroom help, tutoring and help with homework would be beneficial.

Positively, one young person talked about when he was struggling with his schoolwork, he asked for support for all students for whom English was their second language. This was made available and he said it assisted him with his learning.

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[3] The names of the young people in this project are pseudonyms.

In his contribution to the Experts' Views section, Brendan Murray, Principal Education Advisor for the Parkville Youth Justice Precinct, discusses a rights-based approach to education that is grounded in international human rights law:

> When I speak with other teachers or principals about exclusion, I often mention that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone has the right to education", not "everyone has the right to education unless a student misbehaves, or swears at a teacher" In fact, even though I am a principal, I do not believe I have the right to deny anyone the right to education.

No 'Voice' or Consultation about Educational Needs

> There needs to be communication with the education system to find out what all the students really need. — 'PAUL'

The young people who recorded their stories told us they felt disempowered in their education because they were unable to articulate their needs and concerns about their schooling. They felt marginalised and silenced by the school system. A measure of a school's effectiveness should be how well the school engages with and responds to its students.

In his contribution to the Experts' Views section of this report, Robert Ely, teacher and PhD candidate, emphasises that the starting point for motivating effective learning on behalf of so-called "low socioeconomic students" is to find out what they are interested in:

> Establishing a student's range of interests is important, as interest has been shown to be a necessary, but not sufficient, component for effective learning in these students.

Not Being Adequately Recognised as an Individual

> I felt unchallenged a lot of the time, starting and not finishing projects or learning basic skills. It's part of the nature of the school having a diverse range of students with different backgrounds and skill sets. So because of that, being in class you often find yourself learning a lot of very basic skills, which often felt like a bit of a joke. It wasn't stimulating enough. — 'PAUL'

> Well the standard problem with the school system is that the teachers don't show any care for the students when they need help. The teachers may help him or her but the students need to be shown that he or she is an individual, not just a kid of 600. — 'HARRY'

Some young people said they liked learning in practical, 'hands-on' ways, whereas others said they felt they would have benefitted from more formalised approaches. Still others said that they would have benefitted from a mix of practical and theoretical approaches. These statements reinforce the importance of flexible approaches to learning and engaging with individual students to discover how they learn best.

Young people also told us that they did not feel listened to or understood within mainstream school settings and felt lost and ignored in large secondary schools. This often contributed to their disengagement from those settings.

Little Understanding of the Range of Issues Young People Face

> [Hanging out with friends] ... gave me an opportunity to get away from home and not have to worry about what is happening in the household and I could think of other things until the day ended. — 'KATE'

> There are so many kids in schools experiencing mental health problems and not knowing where to turn to. — 'ALEXANDRA'

> The biggest challenges for me at school was the teachers were always treating me different to the other kids because I was a foster kid and I was known to get in trouble at school. — 'KEVIN'

Young people told us that they experienced different treatment because they lived in out-of-home care. Some young people felt disconnected from school because of difficulties at home and with mental health, and the link between these experiences and prior trauma. Although these students should be able to access a range of supports within school, they felt that school was particularly disconnected from other areas of their lives. This resulted in a barrier to accessing education.

Dissatisfaction with Some Aspects of Alternative Education Settings

> If you are a teen going to an alternative school you should work your hardest because when you're hanging out with the kids there, you change. It's not about your education anymore; it's about getting high and drinking and getting arrested by the police. ... Work your hardest so you can go to a mainstream school. — 'HARRY'

Those young people who spoke about their experiences in alternative school settings reported mixed experiences. Some said they felt supported to learn in a range of ways, whereas others criticised the curriculum for being inconsistent, repetitive and trying to do too many things for too many students. Some also identified difficulties with their peers in alternative school settings.

Dr Ann Morrow, Chair of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education Advisory Board, talks about "fixing" inequities in schooling in her contribution to the Experts' Views section. She writes:

> The problems that disadvantaged students encounter every day — and that are exacerbated by our continuing failure, over several decades, to try seriously to reduce inequities within and between our schools — are no longer a matter primarily for educationists.

"THERE ARE SO MANY KIDS IN SCHOOLS EXPERIENCING MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AND NOT KNOWING WHERE TO TURN" [ALEXANDRA]

Chapter Four
Key Lessons and Conclusion

The recommendations made in this report are drawn directly from the stories of the young people.
The recommendations are set out in full at the beginning of this report, and identify seven key areas for policy change:

— Better strategies to tackle bullying and violence

— Promoting equal access to learning experiences

— Providing additional learning assistance both within and outside school

— Greater consultation about young people's educational needs

— Recognising young people's individual needs and circumstances

— Better understanding of the range of issues young people face

— Supporting alternative education settings.

In addition to the recommendations, we urge the government and stakeholders to:

— acknowledge the gains, gaps and opportunities of previous governments to overcome educational disadvantage;

— engage with young people in planning initiatives —youth-focused agencies argue that very often young people are absent from decision-making processes about them. The young people we spoke to told us about the disempowerment they felt when marginalised by the education system;

— implement the strategies contained in the important guides developed by the Child Safety Commissioner on education, including:

  • *Great Expectations: Supporting Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care to Achieve at School* (2007)

  • *Calmer Classrooms: A Guide to Working with Traumatised Children* (2007)

  • *Caring Classrooms: A Guide to Understanding Traumatised Children and Young People — for Parents and the School Community* (2010).

These documents ask educators to recognise the negative impact of experiences of trauma and engagement with education;

— ensure schools address disadvantaged students' needs, including using the relevant government funding to subsidise camps, excursions and parent payments;

— work with community service organisations in partnership on student wellbeing issues;

— undertake research that engages with and listens to young people, using community partnerships to provide additional expertise and evidence;

— monitor and evaluate recent policy and funding changes, including changes to the Student Resource Package funding model, in which funds 'follow' the student; and

— formalise and strengthen the role of the Commissioner for Children and Young People in relation to education and give consideration to the implementation of an Ombudsman for education.

Conclusion

This project set out to capture the voices of young people to provide an insight into their lived experiences of educational disadvantage. The aim was to identify, from the perspective of young people, the key forces that act as barriers to education. In order to achieve this aim, the project produced the stories of 13 young people who had experienced various forms of educational disadvantage.

These stories demonstrate the ways in which young people can be excluded from the school experience. Importantly, the stories point to strategies that can be implemented to address this educational exclusion. The stories provide evidence that can be used to advocate for improvements to the education system to ensure that all young people achieve their full potential within these settings.

As this report has highlighted, the largest single contributor to educational disadvantage is poverty. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds continue to fare worse at school than their peers. Not only does this disadvantage the students in question but also it bodes unfavourably for the nation as a whole.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development **"considers that the most successful countries are those whose students achieve at a high level regardless of their socioeconomic background"** (Lokan in Landvogt 2011, p. 23). This cannot be said to be the case in Australia. Although many positive developments have occurred in the area of educational policy, our schooling system is still failing to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged students. This needs to change if Australia is to meet its goals of promoting equity and excellence in schooling and of enabling young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens (Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians 2008). To accept less than these goals is to short-change our students and the nation as a whole.

Please view the digital stories on the research partners' websites:

— Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service
http://www.goodshepvic.org.au/

— Jesuit Social Services
http://www.jss.org.au/

— MacKillop Family Services
http://www.mackillop.org.au/
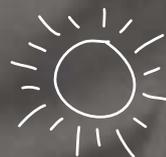
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Appendix 1
Transcripts of the Young People's Digital Stories

"I'M NOT GOING TO SCHOOL ANYMORE BECAUSE OF BULLIES"

(MADISON)

PAUL

I was quite excited to go to my new school. The ideas were quite cool of being an alternative school, having smaller classes, no uniforms and the idea of focusing more on students' interests. I was keen to experience that after my mainstream school. It was a lot bigger and we had uniforms, bigger classes and a more formal setting, with students having the role of students and teachers having the role of teachers. Leaving a weird social dynamic where students can't relate to people out of their role. At my school they treat you like an equal which was a nice change. It's not like teachers at mainstream schools are rude or arrogant, it's just the structure of the school system that puts pressure on teachers, to act 'professionally' in front of their students.

Coming to my new school was good for the first few weeks, until I felt unchallenged a lot of the time, starting and not finishing projects or learning basic skills. It's part of the nature of the school having a diverse range of students with different backgrounds and skill sets. So because of that, being in class you'll often find yourself learning a lot of very basic skills, which often felt like a bit of a joke. It wasn't stimulating enough. A lot of teachers teach out of textbooks and they don't really know what they are teaching or they are not passionate about what they are teaching. I was frustrated when I'm usually an optimistic kind of person. We learnt little bits of information that were unrelated to each other and to me. We'd learn random bits of English, maths, drama or history etc. but nothing was connected to the broader picture. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but felt like I was getting a watered down education that wouldn't lead to anywhere, and I felt it was a general consensus amongst other students.

At the time I was getting involved with a lot of circus skills, and started seriously getting involved with learning as much as I could, I learnt to juggle, fire twirl, etc. I started hanging around with friends in the city because it felt like I was learning just as much in the city as I was at school. It motivated me to take education into my own hands and be more independent in what I wanted to learn about. I started doing more circus stuff. Pushing circus stuff and getting involved with art. And I was starting to teach other students. I just naturally share my skills with other people. Once I got to VCE level I could choose my subjects and there was more of a challenge. I then started to get involved more with my school again.

In retrospect I didn't learn as much academic stuff at my school as I wanted to, but I learnt heaps about the social and community values. So for me it would have been great to do both. Ideally you'd have the social and the academic education offered at the same school. There needs to be communication with the education system to find out what all students really need.

NATALIE
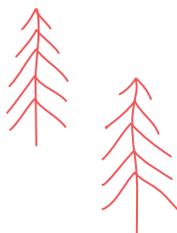
I'm a counsellor, youth worker and chaplain at a local high school. I've been doing this for about five and a half years. I was initially attracted to the school system to create positive change and get outcomes because I was tired of seeing young people in the welfare system repeatedly missing out on access to appropriate education. I believe this is a basic human right. And so many people miss out on this. So many young people end up in terrible poverty, the prison system or with mental health issues because of lack of educational opportunities. I had a tough upbringing, public housing, single parent, mental health issues — it felt like we were all swimming to keep our heads above water — I was one of the lucky ones. Lots of other kids I grew up with, if they're still alive, are living in poverty and it's the same story over again. Coming from that background, I was passionate about making a difference. My mum was great and we had a couple of amazing teachers who brought out the best in me. That's all it takes — a teacher who can get the flame going. I left school when I was fifteen to help look after my brother who was in a bad motorbike accident. He lost his wife and was in a coma. So I helped look after the baby. I probably would have ended up pregnant like a lot of my other girlfriends at the time. But that experience exposed me to all sorts of other people who showed me other ways of living.

When I first started working in the school system I was shocked by how inflexible the learning environment was. This was five years ago. Everyone was so uptight. Instead of being solution focused, everyone in the system was so problem focused and rigid. Compared to a mainstream school, they were flexible, but not nearly as flexible they needed to be. Often the kids were blamed instead of been asked why they were struggling. There was a myth that they were lazy bastards and just wanted to get the dole. Like me growing up. I had serious responsibilities that were obstacles to me accessing this education. If you can read and you've developed thinking skills, anyone can work their way out of difficult situations—you can rationalise. And then there's hope.

There was a girl who came to the school about two years ago. She was about fourteen and a half and in care. Her second day of school, there was some kind of incident in the foyer, so they called me. She was screaming her head off. A worker from child protection had come to take her to court for a custody hearing. She didn't want to go. It was her second day. The workers were really officious and lawyer-like "I'm just doing my job". She was saying, "They'll have to arrest me". And that's what they were going to do. She's fourteen and a half. She didn't give a shit, had no one to love her. I started trying to advocate for her and she challenged me — what's your name, what's your role? I told the worker to leave and I'll bring her to court. If I can get her to choose to go to court, it makes all the difference. I was there to support her. Two years later, she's completed a hospitality course and her two sisters are in school too. She still had a tough, tough upbringing — alcoholic violent parents — no card or call from anyone on her sixteenth birthday, but that girl goes to school, she negotiates and she will be a taxpayer. On her birthday this year, we got her chocolate cake and a card. The following year, she did the same thing for her sister. She was so excited she burst into her sister's class to give her the present. Those girls trust me and other authority figures now. They'll tell us anything. The communication is happening.

If the kids had accommodation at the school, a refuge too if they're in crisis, free public transport to get there, food — if kids need it — and less pressure to perform academically it would make all the difference. Also, schools like ours are funded by the enrolments. These are worked out before census dates in March. As soon as that is over, kids are moved on from other schools — and many of them end up here. But we're not funded to look after that many kids. This funding structure needs to be fixed. In the future, I think we need to think of school as a hub, a place for accessing services as well as basic education. A place for students and parents, that gives a path to community.

KATE

Hanging out with my friends was what I enjoyed the most outta high school 'cos I didn't have much time to catch up with all of them so being at school gave me a chance to spend time with them all. It also gave me an opportunity to get away from home and not have to worry about what is happening in the household I could think of other things until the day ended.

But I loved playing soccer — always have. I had the right amount of people to start a team so all we had to do is find a sponsor. We found one and every Thursday night we would be training, then Sundays would be playing a game. At school we didn't get enough physical exercise and enough sport sessions so when we had sport we would get a chance to work more on our defence.

At school I was extremely bored spent most of the days looking at the clock waiting for it to turn to 3.30 pm. I found studying boring to the max, so I didn't do much of it. It was best when the teachers were out and the students shut up.

By half way through year seven, I spent most days wagging (shopping centre), not going to school, hanging with friends. I thought getting drunk and drug use was more practical because I didn't get much out of school.

In my life circumstances it felt weird. I felt out of place on the days I had to go to school. I would have liked to be treated like an individual, respected, listened to. There were like one or two teachers that treated people like that, which I thought was nice and what this school needed. Sometimes we couldn't afford to go on some school excursions due to not being rich, so I would either sit at home or go out and half of me thought it was a rip off with the price.

My friends were on the same page as me, we didn't like school because of the way we were treated and because school is more text book work, rather than hands-on stuff, it was boring. I needed them to support my interests a bit more.

I think 'cos at that time I was at school it didn't feel like students had a voice. Students would suggest things to the teachers but nothing would ever happen about it, even if people were getting physically threatened nothing happened. Students had to defend themselves and take matters into their own hands.

School didn't teach me much, just that if something was wrong or up you only have yourself and a few trustworthy people to do something about it, meaning you have to defend yourself. I felt that school was not something that I was put on this earth to do.
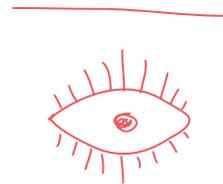
ALEXANDRA

High school was very difficult for me because of bullying and mental health issues. In year seven and year eight, my good friends befriended a guy who was a real bully and really manipulative. Over the course of a few months, he turned all my best friends against me. Everyone was afraid of him. I felt alone and vulnerable. I returned to friends from my childhood, but the bullying didn't stop because the bully was in my class. I started to hate school and my grades were starting to slide. One day he cracked me: I started crying and went to the coordinator. She really eased my mind, but nothing changed. Later that week, things got worse. My dad found me crying outside — it was really cold, middle of winter. He complained to the school but nothing changed. I was one of the highest achieving students at the school, but when I was bullied, I went from getting As to Cs. This bully was a bit of a lost cause and the school didn't know what to do with him. They told me if they expelled him, he'd have no future. And I said, well what about the future of all the other students like me who are having their school experiences debilitated.

In year ten I moved to a different school because I didn't have a future at my old school. This was a much better environment. I was shocked that the teachers actually cared and they were passionate about what they were teaching. I became friends with day students and boarders.

I got into rowing. I'd been a cox for my parents so I knew a bit about it. I felt so strong, resilient, powerful and capable when I was rowing.

In year twelve I started photography. I really enjoyed the practical and theory. Two years ago, I started drawing, painting and doing sculptures.

This drawing of a horse demonstrates how I feel when I'm part of a rowing crew — training, competing … The red is lifeblood. The upright stance is physical strength.

I think all schools should include mental health awareness programming. There are so many kids in schools experiencing mental health problems and not knowing where to turn to.

There should be more support, more education and more understanding. Most schools have a counsellor, but many students are too embarrassed. The awareness program would make it less isolating for people who are having mental health issues, so they don't feel like freaks and can improve their quality of life.

Schools need to recognise bullying early and intervene early — so there's less negative impact on other students. The best way to empower a student is to make sure they have a sound state of mental health.
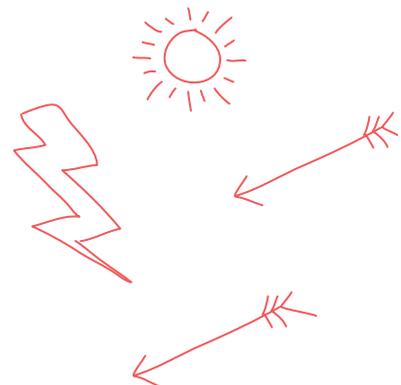
"THERE NEEDS TO BE COMMUNICATION WITH THE EDUCATION SYSTEM TO FIND OUT WHAT ALL THE STUDENTS REALLY NEED."

[PAUL]

SARAH

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They chased me
They couldn't take me
They drove me crazy
They knew I was an Egyptian baby

They knew I had no father
But I had a mother that loved mwah!
They said I had a big nose
And teased me when I wore unfashionable clothes

I was called fat and also a rat
I knew it wasn't my fate and knew you weren't my mate
All the childhood hate
That went on behind the school gates

The teachers didn't notice me
The teachers didn't protect me
So I had no choice but to learn how to fight
In this case to stand up for my rights

At grade two I started punching you
But my conscience told me that's not what I should do
So at lunch I would sing and dance
In my heart I knew it was my only chance
To prove to you not to judge me at a glance

The rock 'n' roll classes made me who I am
Not the constant torment I got from my so-called friends
The music classes was where I belonged
Where I would sit and cry the pain into a song

Now here's a message to you
All you schools gotta improve
The government is blind
You gotta open your mind to all kinds

If I was in my teacher's shoes
I should be trained to pick up on all the little clues
If I was in my teacher's mind
I wouldn't exclude you just because you're a different kind

I would do my best
So no one gets singled out by the rest
And I'd teach all of you
That we care about each one of you

GUY

When I came to Australia primary school was ok but when I started high school I had trouble understanding that level of English.

I really enjoyed maths but I couldn't understand what was being said in English. I even went to the principal to ask for ESL support and after a month we got an ESL teacher once a week. Then my English improved.

In year seven there were lots of fights and gang fights so I started to be scared of school but I made sure I wasn't getting into fights and concentrated on making friends. Some guys kept on saying, "Why don't you go home to your country?" and other racist things, so to avoid these people I sometimes had to wait until school started to be safe but it made me late.

One Saturday the gang forced me to get into a fight with them. I tried to avoid them because that's what I always did but this time they forced me to defend myself and I had to beat them up. Then they started to chase me but I ran away and they couldn't catch me.

Next day at school a guy wanted money from me and I gave him the money. Sometime later he gave my money back and he started to say I'm a good guy. We started to play soccer together. His friends started picking fights with my friends. But the two of us just kept playing soccer together. When we played in the team we really became good friends. His friends started to relate to me. But my friends asked me to not hang around with the Asian people but I didn't care because I like all peoples.

Sometimes I wagged school so that people at school wouldn't fight me. My friends quit school, and they were always telling me that I should quit too, but I hung in to stay at school.

Learning history from Ancient China and science and maths helped me to keep it up even though my friends said I was stupid to go to school. But I enjoyed learning new things.

To make school better we need to find ways to stop the kids from smoking, fighting and wagging. The teachers need to tell them what their chances are when they continue with it.

When we tell teachers how we feel or what is going on, they often think you are lying to them. The teachers could organise a program or check if students are in trouble. They need to check if students make it to school and home again safely.

It would be better if they built more gyms so that everybody could use them at the same time without getting kicked out by the next group, for example the girls don't get a chance to play their sport, so they have to stay out when we're playing soccer.
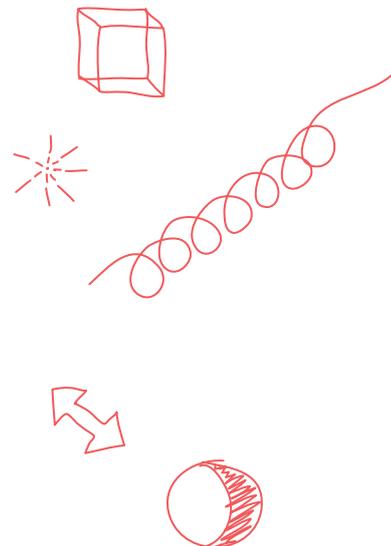
CASEY

I remember back on my first day of school, it was just, exciting, you know? Having the feeling of meeting people and doing things that are fun.

I guess it was also pretty scary at first, to start cause you don't know anyone and don't know what to expect. It was kinda like that, scary, for a few years then it changed.

As you grew and became more of a person it became harder because the work was getting harder and you got categorised. It wasn't just about having a group of friends, it was about being put into a group for who you are, or who they thought you were. If you weren't in the cool and popular group you'd get teased and you weren't worth knowing.

To get into the cool group people would look at you and choose, but it was only one main person that got to decide, no one else would have a say.

You get judged, they think they can see your ability without even knowing. If you didn't get up to the standard they thought you were at they'd give up and wouldn't even bother even trying anymore. Then it would make you feel bad about yourself, even if you were trying, but being told you weren't, you'd give up and go somewhere where you thought people would believe in you and give you the right responses to get you somewhere in life.

I stopped going to school because I got sick of the way I was treated. I wasn't given a chance, no one would listen, no one. And I thought if I went out of school, and into the real world, I'd be able to be me, my full self and not worry about what everyone else thought.

But I learnt to never give up on a future. Even if it means you don't need school. Don't let people tell you who you are because you're the only one who knows yourself truly.
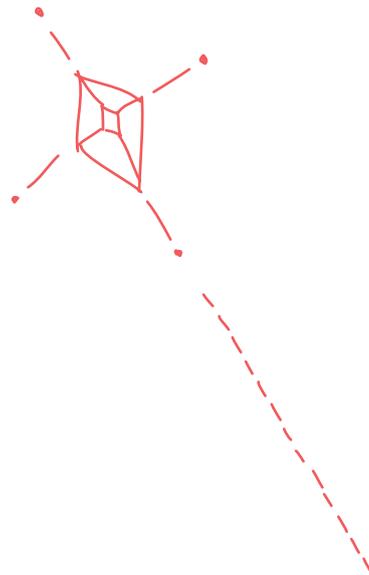
ANDY

Going back to school after six months off, I was thinking of my future and education. I went back because I wanted to get into an apprenticeship to be a brickie. But I knew to get an apprenticeship you needed to know lots about maths and learn stuff.

I think now I'm on my way. I like school. I like learning general stuff, that's why people who can't handle mainstream schools go to smaller, modified schools. That's why I'm doing it.

I'm not going to mainstream school anymore because I didn't like being in a class with 24 kids. I needed a lot more attention; I had mental health stuff going on and personal stuff. I kept getting distracted and distracting other people. My temper was pretty bad too. I got abusive to the teachers sometimes. I couldn't handle being in such a big class and not getting the attention I needed. I'd get angry to show the teachers what I needed but it obviously didn't work.

When I think about ways it could have been different I think instead of having one teacher they could have put two or three teachers in to give some of the kids some extra help. They need to watch the kids. You can tell the difference by looking at their work and looking at what they get done. I would have liked that to have happened. If it had I would've stayed in mainstream school.

I think I've missed out by not being in mainstream school. I only go to school three days a week now, instead of five. If you go five days you learn way more and you get a better education. My chances of becoming a doctor or a brain surgeon or lawyer are way lower now.

I slacked off back then, which is something I shouldn't have done. When I was younger I wanted to be a doctor but ever since I stuffed up at school I can't. It's not impossible for me but very unlikely; it's like the chances of me meeting Jon Bon Jovi, not impossible but very unlikely.
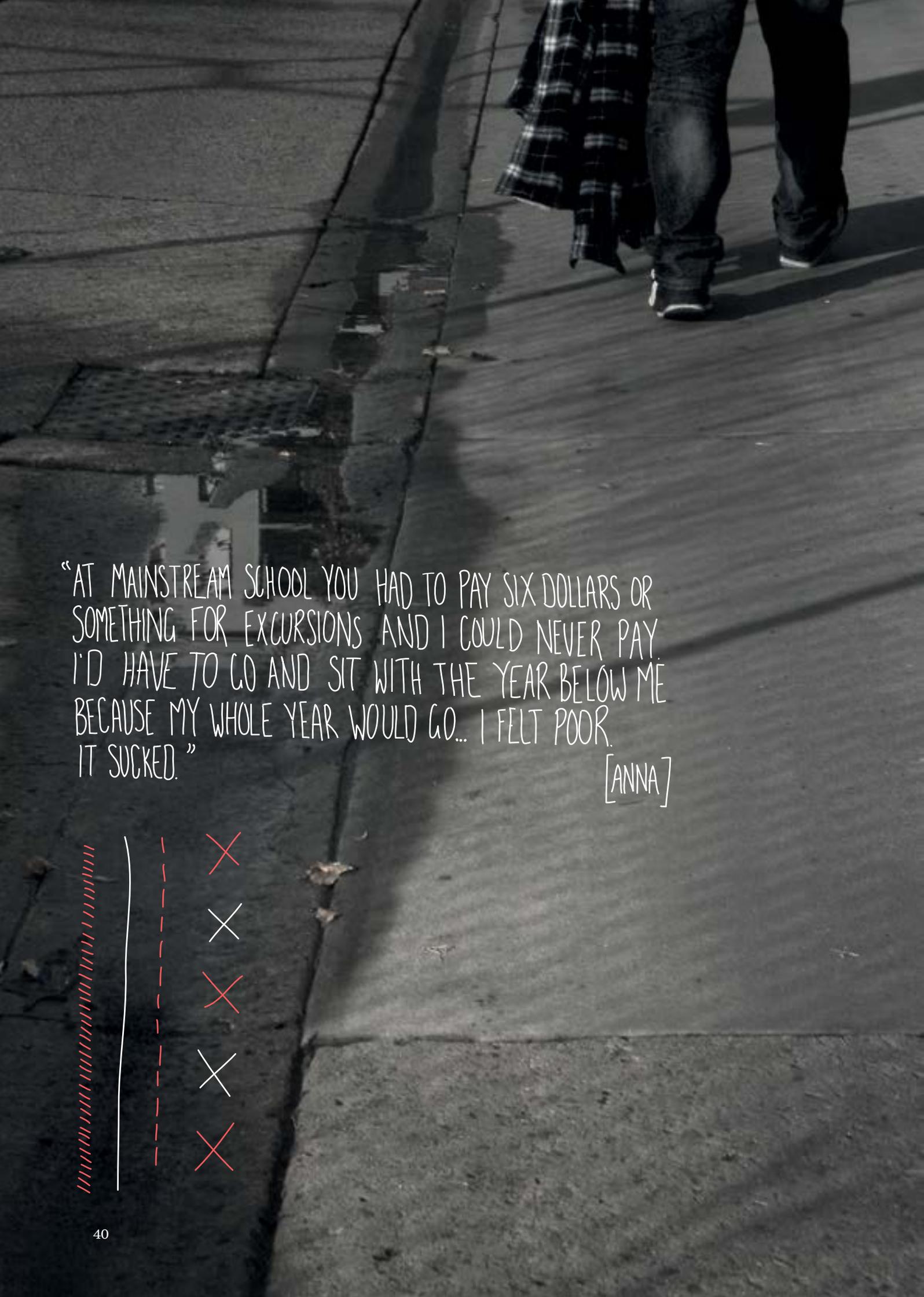
"AT MAINSTREAM SCHOOL YOU HAD TO PAY SIX DOLLARS OR SOMETHING FOR EXCURSIONS AND I COULD NEVER PAY. I'D HAVE TO GO AND SIT WITH THE YEAR BELOW ME BECAUSE MY WHOLE YEAR WOULD GO... I FELT POOR. IT SUCKED."

[ANNA]
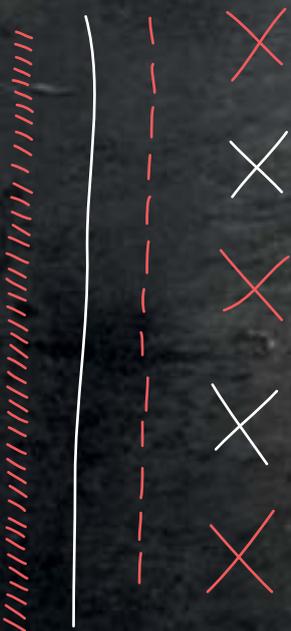
KEVIN

The biggest challenges for me at school was the teachers were always treating me different to the other kids just because I was a foster kid and I was known to get in trouble at school. I was the class clown.

The other things that I had trouble with at school was bullies and homework because as a 12 to 13 year old boy when the year 10s come up to you and say stuff to you it hurts.

I had a lot of trouble with homework because I was always getting into trouble so I was never in class so I didn't understand the work or homework that was given as homework. Even though I was in trouble, if I had extra help, like a tutor, it would have helped.

What I liked about school was that you could join the interschool sports teams like football, cricket etc. I liked going to TAFE because they treated me like an adult and that's the way I wanted to be treated when I was at high school.

If I had the power to change things about school I would change how the teachers treat and teach the students like making sure that they all understand the work they have been given.

I would get the schools to think about making schooling more practical instead of the students always doing theory, and if the students need tutors make sure there is enough support for the students.

Uniform is another thing I would change because I think that if students were allowed to wear whatever they wanted they would feel more comfortable and would be more likely to focus.

I want to tell other students that starting at a new school as year 7 is hard but you need to make sure you stay positive and make sure it's something that you want to do. It's very important that you do schooling because without it you will end up with no job and living off Centrelink which is a shit pay.

If I could tell the teachers one thing I'd say treat every student the same because as a kid that wasn't the same as everyone else, it was hard to stay focused and concentrate.

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ANNA

I've been to mainstream school and now I'm at an alternative school. There were positives and negatives at my old school. Some of the good things were my friends — the ones that were good to me — and some of the teachers were nice too, but some weren't.

I can remember my sport teacher was one of the nice ones. She would speak to me nicely and the days I felt bad and didn't want to do anything she would let me sit down or go to speak to a teacher about how I was feeling. Some of the mean teachers wouldn't let me go and talk to someone when I was feeling down.

I got moved into a lower class, I remember saying it was the dumb class. After a while it felt ok to be moved because I thought I'd pass this year now. I felt more confident in myself because I wasn't falling behind.

I remember starting a new school. I was scared at the start but it was ok because I knew some people so I didn't feel as bad. Some of the teachers made me feel better too. They said, "Don't worry about it, work on your schooling. You don't need people that put you down in your life".

I've been bullied at school before. Things like prank calls and messages on Facebook. It makes me feel like I can't go to school and talk to people. It makes me feel sad. It makes me feel angry too because I don't want to bash people but when they say it to me it makes me think about it. Teachers should try to stop it. It makes it worse when they single people out though. At mainstream school I got called names and this girl turned other people on me. The teachers didn't do anything. They told that girl to stop, but she didn't, she just kept being mean and I think there should be no bullying at all.

I think I could have stayed at mainstream school if there was no bullying and they had one on one teaching with me in subjects like English, science and Maths.

The school I'm at now does fun stuff like going on excursions but at mainstream school you had to pay $6 or something for excursions and I could never pay. I'd have to go and sit with the year below me because my whole year would go on the excursion. I felt poor. It sucked. It wasn't that people looked at me differently, it was more just how I felt. If I didn't have to pay for excursions it would have been heaps easier. I think more work experience would be good too because once a year is not enough. I would do it once a term because it looks good on your resume and gets you a foot in the door.
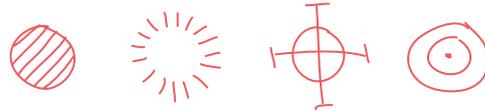
HARRY

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Well the standard problem with the school system is that the teachers don't show any care for the students when they need help. The teachers may help him or her but the students need to be shown that he or she is an individual, not just a kid out of 600. It goes the same for all the kids in the school system.

The problems with the alternative school programs, which I've been in and out of for years, from personal experience they may show closer attention in alternative schools, but if you have to go to that school you'll see how the kids treat each other for being different. For example a kid got the shit kicked out of him because he didn't drink alcohol, or smoke drugs and the teachers just suspended the boys who did it, but then the teachers told the kid who got beat up not to charge them because they would get into serious trouble with the police. I thought that that was a load! I was told this by the young man who got into the fight. The teachers, principal and the people who are supposed to be watching out for you should be taking more care. People shouldn't be fighting because they aren't liked or the most popular. Teachers should pay more attention when there's tension and then do something about it to stop it.

If you are a teen going to an alternative school you should work your hardest because when you're hanging out with the kids there you change. It's not about your education anymore; it's about getting high and drinking and getting arrested by the police. If you do that you'll screw your life up, you won't be able to get a job so like I was saying before, work your hardest so you can go to a mainstream school. And so you can get a proper education so you don't end up like a dole bludger, because if you don't go to school to learn, you won't be able to work anywhere.

I think being in school when you're living in care is really difficult because you are too different to everyone else. Everyone treats you like you're weird. The teacher's treat you like you are a 'resi' kid, which means like a feral and uncontrolled. Everyone should be treated equally. The only reason I go to school is to get an education because you need it in life to succeed.

I think teacher's at the moment give you a work sheet and say it might be hard but just do it, but I think they should actually sit there and explain it to you so you have less chance of failing on the work sheets.

My main message to students out there is to choose your friends wisely so you don't get distracted with school. Hang out with your friends but don't mess up your life because they want you to do something. If you don't think it's right, don't do it.
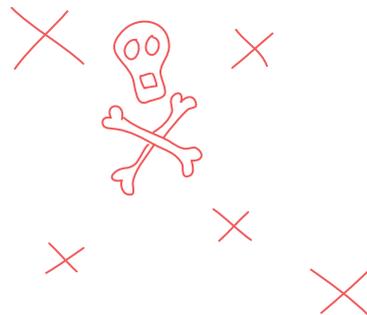
WALID

I'm currently doing a pre-VCE course with a school in the city. I enjoy going there as I get to have a good lunch break in the city and plenty of smoke breaks. The teachers there are funny and keep us entertained. They treat us like adults. They didn't treat us like adults in high school. I would have liked to have been treated like an adult in high school.

Being in care and getting an education can be hard. Once I got into school but had to wait two weeks to go to school 'cos my fees weren't paid for. That got me shitty. When you have to apply for funding for school and wait a long time for a response it gets annoying. I believe that it shouldn't have taken so long to pay for my fees. I got annoyed and embarrassed when I got kicked out of class in front of everyone because my fees weren't paid. I think that the school should have let me stay 'cos it wasn't my fault.

I just wanted to go to school.

I wanna say to all the teachers that I'd love for you to concentrate on all of us. Not just one kid. Communicate with us. Describe the work more. We had to do a lot of work on our own and figure it out on our own. There wasn't a lot explained.

I think school sports was heaps fun, we got to mingle around with all the students, we had a laugh and the teachers were really cool. I think there should be more school sports instead of only one day. Cos it gets us away from work and you feel better going back to class work.

Being in a resi unit and going to school is hard. If I was living at home, my parents would take me to school. In resi, you sometimes have to catch public transport if the staff at your unit aren't available. Sometimes you're late and it's not your fault. It's hard to concentrate on homework at the unit 'cos you get distracted 'cos people are yelling and stuff. You do have a study room but you can't close the door when you're in there. Staff have to supervise you and that's hard 'cos leaving the door open, you can hear people talking. I get distracted easily.

Getting an education is important and we need it to make a better future for ourselves. It's just harder when you're not from a perfect family and people don't understand. We should make the most of it and not leave school because we will regret it as we get older.

Don't forget that we all come from different families and not perfect families. Not having parents and living in resi can be hard. Please understand us, support us.
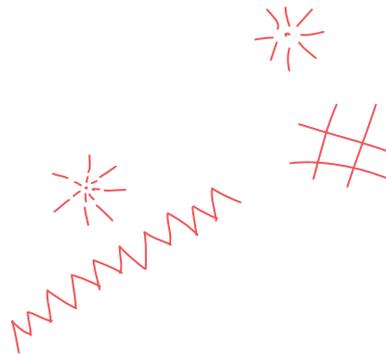
MADISON

I'm not going to school anymore because of bullies. Teachers aren't doing much. Every time I get bullied I'd go see a teacher and they say to ignore it and it doesn't help and instead of getting angry and punching someone or something I just don't go. Or I'll let it die down until it's forgotten about. I know it's not the right way to do it and we've tried to sort it out but it just makes it worse.

Teachers should … not suspend people, that's not cool, but, I don't know.

There's one girl, she was going to leave the volleyball team 'cos of me. All she does is spread rumours about me and it annoys me. She doesn't want me there so I'm just going to leave. She's starting rumours but I haven't spoken to the teachers because there's no point. They say to ignore it and walk away but it's hard to ignore and pretend it doesn't matter when you've got 300 students talking about it because it's gone around the whole school.

Sometimes they get us to sit down for a meeting and say just don't be friends, but as soon as the meeting is over they just start it all over again. If they got suspended they'd just make it worse because then they'd start spreading rumours about how I got them suspended and shit.

I go to school to get away from being bullied at home but it doesn't work. And I get bullied because my family is poor. I hate going to school without food, I just hate it. I think if I had food everyday I'd be more likely to go to school. I try walking away from the bullies but when there's people coming at you from all angles it's hard.

If my little sister was being bullied I'd tell her to go talk to the principal. And maybe I'd tell her to get our mum to talk to the bully's mum. People fight because of rumours, that's why punch ons start.

I think people need to be more educated on what bullying can lead to. People have killed themselves over being bullied. It would help if schools talked to people more about bullying and what can happen.

Teachers already know I'm an angry kid so they like to believe it's all my fault anyway.

Teachers should believe kids and not just say it doesn't matter and that it's baby stuff.

My art teacher bullied me. She knows my brother is a naughty and so she straight away thinks that I'm going to be like that too.

Teachers need to take in what kids say. They need to take an interest in it. If teachers were being bullied they wouldn't like it, and if we put in a complaint about them nothing happens. If someone commits suicide it's the teachers' fault because the teachers obviously aren't listening and that's just not cool.

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Appendix 2
Experts' Views

A Parent's Perspective [4]

I live in one of the poorer suburbs of Melbourne. My three children, aged seven, 12 and 13, attend local public schools. This was for financial reasons and partly because I had hoped the school system would support them. English is not spoken in most households in my street. One neighbouring family came from Vietnam in a small boat, the other from El Salvador as refugees. All the parents hope that their children will have a better chance at life than they had. For us parents, education is the key to our children's future.

Quite by chance, we have been fortunate with our local state primary school. The headmaster and the community of teachers have worked tirelessly to create a safe, enjoyable and positive experience at school for their students. These teachers make a real difference. The children are treated as friends and a joy to be with. They are welcomed and nurtured. There is a buddy system in which each older student is responsible for one of the little ones. Violence is not tolerated by the children or the teachers. Learning is recognised as a positive experience, even when only a little is learnt. Little things they learn can add up to a lot when you keep at it. This is a valuable lesson in itself. An effort is made to make sure no one is left behind, which cannot be easy when so many of the students do not speak, read or write in English.

The primary school has not been afraid to experiment with new modes of instruction. The students and teachers work together to make new things possible — another great lesson to learn. When the school provided laptop computers to each student in years five to six, the shared expectation was that the computers would be looked after. This shared vision was made possible by the established culture of caring at the school. These computers are not owned by the students (many families cannot afford them); they are on loan. No computers have been stolen, lost or vandalised in the three years of the program. It seems that there is little to fear from these kids.

My experience with secondary school has not been so positive. Secondary schools have their own ways of doing things, their own rules and expectations, and students have to learn to deal with them. My son first noticed the difference in the school's corridor, before making it into class. At primary school, if a teacher or headmaster met him outside the classroom, he was met with a genuine welcome, perhaps a casual "how are you going" or a sociable comment in reference to some activity; nothing condescending, nothing threatening, or accusing. Now, he is told to hurry up and get to class. Students are quick to distinguish between cruel and kind, and they know who is genuine. My son was struck by the two-faced nature of some of his teachers in secondary school. They put on one face for when I'm around and change back when I'm gone.

I worry about the harm done to my child at secondary school. I was not worried like this before. I'm concerned about the disillusionment that sets in and leads to self-harm. I'm concerned about a future that closes down, rather than opens out. I'm concerned that if I don't intervene, then it will be too late to correct the harm done. I'm confused. Initially, I had hoped to find a secondary school that was integrated with, or connected to the innovative teaching styles of the local primary school, but that was a waste of time. Our secondary schools make no attempt to build on the innovations of primary school. We have tried two different secondary schools in two years, but to no avail.

Another problem I face as a parent is that I scarcely know what is taught at school. There is no curriculum to follow. I have no idea what level of reading, writing, maths, social awareness or science my children are expected to reach in any given year. Even when I'm told the names of subjects, I have no idea what they mean. What does SOSE or Integrated Studies cover? Whatever they are, my son does not talk about them.

Perhaps the most serious problem I face is with the course coordinator. He is defensive and takes care to cover his tracks and avoid blame. The system is based on conforming to rules and the threat of detention. "It's my way, or the highway" is how my son describes it. He talks of a conga-line from janitors through to junior and senior teachers, up to coordinators and the head. "They all suck up," he says, with students on the bottom of the ladder. The contrast with the primary school community could not be more extreme.

No doubt, my son is not blameless, but I do not want to assert blame on anyone. I want to live in the knowledge that school is a good place for my kids. Unfortunately, when my son is presented with a long list of ways to fail, he will find a way onto the list. He says the school's attitude makes him worse. He has lost any sense of enjoyment he once had. He is disengaged and equates schooling with imprisonment. He happens to learn more through his feelings than logic. If a situation does not feel right, he withdraws. This has not helped him in school. He has virtually stopped learning this year and is falling behind in his studies. Somehow, I, too, have become one of the problems the teachers must face. I feel like I need to apologise when I go to school to find out what's going on.

Finally, I should note that my two younger children are progressing well at school, and I think they will get through secondary school better than my eldest son because of their native wits — in spite of the system, rather than because of it.

James Tonson, Victorian Student Representative Council Coordinator, 2006–2009

Voices for the Voiceless — Breaking Down Entrenched Roles

I think we all agree that everyone deserves to have a voice, a right to express their opinions. It is one of the fundamental values of our democracy. The problem is that this is too often a motherhood statement; something a lot of people say because it sounds good, without really thinking through what it means in practice. Despite our 'mature' democracy, there remain many voiceless groups in our society. So, we still have some way to go in universalising the franchise of social–political expression.

The under-heard group I've worked with is secondary students. My passion for trying to help students be heard arose from dissatisfaction with my high school experience and a frustration that, as a student, I had a lot of ideas about how to improve the school, but no one was interested in hearing them. This led to my involvement in creating the Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) and eventually having the privilege to serve as its coordinator from 2006 to 2009. The VicSRC is a student-run organisation that represents students at the state-wide level and assists student representative councils to better represent the students of their school.

In setting up this representative organisation, our key challenge was finding a way in which students could effectively represent themselves. This meant working with a cohort about whom the conventional wisdom was (and largely still is) that they didn't have anything useful to say. In my experience, this wisdom has been such a strongly held convention that many students believe it themselves. This meant that, as advocates for student voices, we had to convince not only the teachers, parents, principals and bureaucrats of the potential of student voice but also the students.

Luckily, we had a rich and endlessly renewable resource with which to make our case — the students themselves! I am still amazed at the transformations I have seen take place, in the students and in the adults they relate to. It can happen quickly, or slowly, but there is really only one key ingredient: listening. By this I mean that deep listening we can only do when we bring our whole attention — heart, mind and soul — to tune into not just the words but also the spirit of what someone or some group is saying. This kind of listening is an undervalued skill in our society and one that I fear we are losing. Yet I believe it is crucial if we are to build and maintain the peaceful, democratic, just and prosperous society we all say we want.

It is particularly important that we offer this kind of listening to those groups within our society that we find most difficult to hear. If my experience with secondary students is anything to go by, then getting them to start talking can be difficult. However, once they find their voice, the rewards are rich for all involved. Much of the difficulty stems from the fact that they are not used to being listened to, so their first reaction to the opportunity is often one of bewilderment, shyness or even fear. Some have had costly experiences of someone saying they will listen but not really meaning it, so they can also react with suspicion. So it's important to provide a safe space for people to be heard and to be patient with them. Often the first things they say are later surpassed by more significant ideas or questions.

I often recount an experience I had with a group of students in Broadmeadows. On behalf of the VicSRC, I had arranged a meeting with about 40 people from student representative councils from six local schools to discuss the idea of having an ongoing student network. Not only were these students wary of each other due to the usual inter-school rivalries, but also they were wary of me. They'd seen enough do-gooders come along to "consult" them only to have their ideas dismissed or used against them. So when I asked them for their concerns or ideas, I got the usual pat answers about fundraising, picking up rubbish and addressing bullying. I challenged these answers, asking more questions to dig a little deeper, but for a long time it felt like pulling teeth. I had to coach and cajole them every step of the way to get them thinking and expressing the many ideas they had buried in despair. But, finally, something clicked, they decided I was genuine in my questions and was not just there for me. Their suspicion melted and I was swamped with a tidal wave of ambitious ideas, comments and questions. They sensed a genuine opportunity, and I had to quickly adjust from trying to break through their barriers to trying to find ways to harness their energy and vision.

Once they are talking, the next step is working out how to process their raw expression into something others can understand. People used to being voiceless generally don't just burst into articulate prose. Instead they express an initial flood of unformed energy that rushes out like water from a burst dam. In this initial rush, students often come up with grand ideas for changing the world that the "experienced" adult is inclined to dismiss as pipe-dreams. But we should not let this discourage us from listening. This is where it is important to listen to the spirit of the message, not just the words. We need to find the essence of what is most important to the students and continue the conversation about how to manifest this in the real world.

This second phase of conversation is an important way of demonstrating how deeply we are really listening. In the first stage, we have to be open to hearing anything to help the students feel safe to speak. But, once we have captured the essence of their message, then we begin negotiating between the world of ideals and the world we all live in. This shows that our listening is not just a temporary exercise and that we want to integrate what we have learnt into the rest of our (school) life. Learning to mediate our ideals with reality is an important skill for every person and a part of the socialising process on the journey to adulthood. Students need to practise this skill and require varying degrees of guidance. Mentors need to partner with them, always ensuring that they feel ownership of the process. We can offer a hard-nosed reality check, creative middle-way solutions, or support and advocacy for the actual implementation. Our offers should always be refusable, so as not to stifle the students' learning process. For me, the goal of their learning and empowerment is more important than actually achieving their dreams. Ultimately, I want them to find their own voice and be able to make their dreams a reality independently.

Finally, a word about what this requires of us, those who want to help students express their voice. This process is about freeing students stuck in a role of "voicelessness" and helping them to learn a new role — that of empowered partner. This requires us also to learn a new role — that of empowered partner or guide. We adults have to give up our self-righteous monopoly on "knowledge" and "experience". We have to stop playing our role in a way that maintains our dominance over our protégés and instead let our role be dictated by the students. Whether we need to offer them a listening ear, a safe space, a reality check, a creative idea or a supportive hand, it has to be for their sake, not to build our own sense of self-worth or to secure our own position in the hierarchical system that we call education.

Herein lies a problem. Almost everyone in the education system has a clearly defined role, whether it be as a student, teacher, principal, parent or bureaucrat. Each of these roles comes with a well-established rank or status in a hierarchy that no one ever needs to explain. The irony is that being closer to the top of the chain doesn't seem to make people feel more empowered. As VicSRC Coordinator, I had the chance to engage with people in many roles, right up to Education Minister, many of whom have great ideas about how we should be re-shaping the schooling system. Yet everyone seemed to feel that power is in the hands of some other group. The students think the principal runs the school, but the principal knows he/she can only influence things so far, and the same is repeated at the system-wide level. I believe the reality is that each group has some power (though not in equal amounts), but that all would have more power if we could break free of our entrenched roles (and status) and learn to respect each other as people, not as roles. This in itself will create the social capital required to address many issues and will create a better learning and working environment for everyone.

So how do we begin? I say we must begin with the students. They are the most disempowered group and the reason we are all there to begin with. They also have the greatest reserves of goodwill and enthusiasm that, once tapped, will infect everyone else. We also have the responsibility and capacity as adults to take the first step. With the right awareness, we can see their needs before they do and respond to empower them. Once they become our empowered partners, then it is only natural for them to seek to understand and address the needs of those around them. But we only hinder their empowerment if we introduce these before they are ready. So we have to enter this process open to our own transformation, ready to see everyone's role in a new light and be willing to take the first step.

Robert B. W. Ely, Teacher and PhD Psychology Candidate

"But I don't want to."
If you are reading this on a weekday during working hours, somewhere in Australia, a casual or 'substitute' teacher is about to walk with trepidation into a classroom full of "low SES" (low socioeconomic status) teenagers they don't know, a list of stuff to learn left by their normal teacher (if they are lucky), and hope. As you can imagine, this sometimes goes well, but often goes badly. Some years ago, I was faced with this very situation as a teacher, wondering how I was going to motivate 26 year eight maths students from a big 'low SES' school in a large country town known at the time as the teenage pregnancy capital of Australia. I did not know the kids, and they did not know me. Once the students in small groups had acknowledged, and then completely ignored my presence, attempts at control seemed fruitless. I opened the note left by the department head and looked down the list to Period 5 …

"Period 5 – 8BLUE, Chapter 3, pages 89 to 91, the texts are in the cupboard."

I went to the cupboard and found several piles of books and chose the one most likely. I held it up and asked, "Is this the book you work from?"

"Yes, sir," groaned the pair of girls quietly talking, sitting at the front.

I opened to the relevant page and found that the work was reasonably complicated multiplication.

I said in a loud voice, "Hey, you guys, I can do this. How about I write all the answers on the whiteboard and you can copy them out, and then we can have done the work together, and you won't get into trouble?"

The class was quiet.

"What?" said a boy up the back.

I repeated myself. With a bit of discussion, it was generally decided that this was a good idea. I got my whiteboard marker out of my pocket, they got their workbooks out and we got to work. Answers went up on the board and were dutifully copied out. The vice principal walked by, looked in, saw students writing and a teacher at the board. She waved and smiled. All went well for about five minutes until the boy up the back spoke up again.

"But, sir, how do we know if they are the right answers, huh?"

"I am a teacher. I passed year eight maths and I know how to do this stuff," was my reply.

We got back to work, and I wrote out a few more answers until I was interrupted once more by one of the girls at the front.

"But, sir, just 'cos you know how you're getting the answers, it doesn't mean we do. You're a crap teacher, you're supposed to teach us how, not just give us the answers, and we don't even know what the questions are!"

"Fair enough," I replied. "Would you like me to show you how I got the answers?"

"YES!" was the collective reply.

Some students then distributed the textbooks, and we got back to work. I did the working and the answers on the whiteboard, and the students copied until I deliberately made a mistake.

"But, sir, that's wrong!" said the boy up the back.

"OK, you do it then," I replied.

"Yeah, OK." The student came to do it on the board, getting it right with a bit of help and encouragement.

"You had all better check the other answers that I wrote up then …," I added.

And so the class continued …

In this class, motivation to attend (catch up with friends, not get detention) was transformed into motivation to succeed (get the answers right) and then motivation to learn (how to get the answers right).

Sometime later, I eventually found myself teaching music/media/maths/English/science in an educational training unit in a male-only juvenile justice centre in outback NSW. Motivation here was a more complex beast. As a teacher, I felt in command of any teaching and learning situation I would be confronted with. One day, a young student/prisoner whom I had grown to know well over the previous three months — who unsurprisingly was a 'low SES' (low socioeconomic status) student — walked into my class, and in response to my setting up the classroom for a maths lesson, he said, "But I don't want to."

He meant it too. I suggested we learn something else today, but he said, "No, f**k off."

After further attempts to persuade him, his determined lack of interest in learning anything gave me pause for thought. Why did he not want to learn anything? I had the means at my disposal to force him to participate in the class — my training, a good prior relationship and ultimately a punishment for non-compliance that automatically resulted in 12 hours in "the slot" (solitary confinement). I chose not to use any of my teacher's strategies for a while. He learnt nothing that day or the next. In the weeks to follow, I turned back to the old teacher's tricks, heavy scaffolding, open questioning, the carrots of praise, the stick of disappointment, humour and fellowship — and he did engage with learning in his own way on a regular basis. His learning was as it had always been — slow, staged and often frustrating for us both.

These two encounters, among many others over a period of 15 years teaching "low SES" students, led to detailed research of students and their motivation to learn. As a result, a six-month intensive study was done with 12 students who "had not previously experienced success in an educational environment". It was found that these students learnt no more effectively when they were being compliant than when they were not. They DID learn more effectively when they were doing what they wanted to do, independent of their perception of compliance with wishes of the teacher (Ely, Ainley and Bortoli 2008; Ely, Bortoli and Ainley 2008). This being the case, how do you

find out what these students are interested in? Can this information help a teacher to help them learn? From experience, "low SES" students are not going to tell you anything until they trust you, and perhaps not even then. Currently, a study is taking place at the University of Melbourne to establish the range of interests that "low SES" students possess by encouraging the students to explore and select from a range of potential interests. This process has the practical benefit of finding out what these kids are interested in without asking them (Ely, Ainley and Pearce 2011; Ely, Ainley and Pearce 2010; Ely, Ainley and Pearce 2010). Establishing a student's range of interests is important, as interest has been shown to be a necessary, but not sufficient, component for effective learning in these students.

In Australia, "low SES" has a particular pejorative meaning, usually associated with poor behaviour and low motivation for learning. It is arguable that Australia is unique in the world in this regard: other countries have rich and poor children, but we have children in "high SES" and "low SES" schools. "High SES" schools are often expressed as "rich" schools. "Low SES" schools are never described as "poor". "High SES" schools are substantially government funded and usually sectarian. They are exempt from anti-discrimination laws in all states of Australia. They can, and do, exclude students on the basis of ability to pay, gender, sexuality, parental marital status or actual/predicted behaviour. In contrast, "low SES" schools, that is, state schools, which are public in purpose, benefit, access, control, ownership, accountability, provision and funding, do not and cannot exclude students on any of the above grounds. To give some perspective, there is a new joke doing the rounds:

> QUESTION: What is the difference between a child who is 'academically unmotivated' and a child who is 'bored, gifted and talented'?
> ANSWER: Their postcode, and about $30,000.

Whether the joke is funny because it's true, or offensive because it's true, depends upon your sense of humour. Nevertheless, the truth behind this 'joke' is that, if you wish to motivate those students who need the most help with their education, you know which postcodes to look in.

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Brendan Murray, Principal Education Advisor, Parkville Youth Justice Precinct, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Rights-Based Education

I believe that everyone has the right to education. This is not just because this fundamental right is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also because I believe in human equality and because I believe in education as a universal platform that provides an opportunity for all people to realise their full potential. This does not seem naively idealistic to me. This seems fair.

In 2007, I opened a school in northern metropolitan Melbourne called the Pavilion School, with my colleague and close friend, Josie Howie. Josie and I had many ideas that we hardly regarded as radical approaches to education for our new school. We simply thought of creating a school where rights were privileged, and not rights that we concocted, but rights recognised in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians and the principles outlined in the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 (VIC).

We made a decision that we would enrol children only when no other school would enrol that child. To give real meaning to the right to education, we decided we would create a 'no exclusion' policy. We informed every child who was interested in enrolling in our school to consider the no exclusion policy carefully, for under no circumstance would we suspend or expel a child from our school. When

children, their families or the support workers would enquire why we would adopt such an approach if children misbehaved in a socially inappropriate way at school, we responded by asking if exclusion from the previous school had made life better for them or if that intervention had improved their education. Of course, the standard response was a confused "no". We did not refer to research indicating that exclusion policies for children improved education at a personal or systemic level. Instead, we explained that if children made a decision to voluntarily return to school, and if we as staff listened to our students and created an environment and an approach that was respectful and conducive to effective learning, then any overt act within our school that might warrant a suspension or exclusion at another school would be seen as a 'cry for help'. Therefore, we would, in such a circumstance, increase the child's supports and increase their timetable to help them, rather than exclude that child. We would work hard towards creating a secure base within the school and a secure attachment with teachers.

Is there anyone who truly believes that excluding children from school is a mature and responsible approach within a sophisticated society? The default position for those uncertain how to work with a child who is proving behaviourally challenging or for those fearful of adopting a rights-based approach is often: "But what about the rest of the children in my class who want to learn?" or "I have a curriculum to teach." My response is generally a probing question that asks, "What is education?" Again, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights serves me well: "education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality." Is it not educative to teach children how to act in social situations? Some will say: "No, that's not my job. I'm a teacher." This is regardless of the fact that their registration in Victoria as a teacher is contingent on them accepting and agreeing to uphold the six Principles of Learning and Teaching that state that teachers must create a learning environment that is safe and supportive and promotes independence, interdependence and self-motivation.

When I speak with other teachers or principals about exclusion, I often mention that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone has the right to education", not "everyone has the right to education unless a student misbehaves, or swears at a teacher." In fact, even though I am a principal, I do not believe I have the right to deny anyone the right to education. My colleagues do not always agree. It is difficult to create a paradigm shift in thinking and approach when our own central Department of Education recently published Effective Schools are Engaging Schools: Student Engagement Policy Guidelines that dedicates 25 per cent of its content

to a prescriptive guide for how to suspend and expel children complete with Department templates.

The Pavilion School has never suspended or expelled a child. How can a school or an education system purport to pursue school connectedness or a sense of belonging when exclusion hangs above a child's head? There have been many reasons why children could have been suspended or expelled at the Pavilion School (following Department guidelines), but for what purpose? What does anyone learn in this case? Instead we choose to support the student more within our school. We ask the other students to provide more support for their peer in need. We remind students that the Pavilion School is their school; that it is a better place when they are in attendance; that we have unconditional positive regard for them; and that, together, we will work through any problems that may arise, so that we may all realise our full potential through education.

Maybe this all sounds unrealistic. But, if we can achieve this at the Pavilion School with students who have exhibited the most challenging behaviours within our school system at their previous schools, then why can't such an approach be applied across the entire Victorian education system? The Pavilion School receives no more funding than any other Victorian Government School, so this cannot be a simple answer. It must be an approach: a Rights-Based Approach that is shared and consistent among the entire school community.

There is no reason why teachers and their principals could not commit to upholding agreed ideals for the betterment of our society. Educationalists should internally regulate a professional sense of accountability that promotes human rights, education responsibilities and social expectations so that our children will not be excluded from our schools.

No one is better for excluding a child from a school.

Associate Professor Pamela Snow, School of Psychology & Psychiatry (Bendigo Regional Clinical School), Monash University

Oral Language Competence and Early Literacy: A Hidden Key to Unlocking Educational Disadvantage

It's hard to imagine a world in which the quality of our verbal communication was not important. Every day, we engage in a wide range of interactions, from brief, seemingly mundane conversations with family matters about a small practicality, to negotiations over the telephone when we need to

query an account, to being interviewed for a job, describing how to perform a certain procedure to a work colleague, or explaining our feelings to our intimate partners — and of course many more, too varied to mention. We form impressions about other people the moment they open their mouths and start talking. A person's accent, vocabulary choice and the degree of sophistication in their spoken language instantly help us to "locate" that person in the social order. Oral language competence, or everyday talking and listening skill, then, is critical to our success in all facets of life and has particular relevance to educational success, although its role here is unfortunately often overlooked or under-estimated. In many respects, it might be said that oral language competence is like the air we breathe — it's all around us, essential for our life as humans, but we don't pay much attention to it until there is something wrong with it. In this brief commentary, however, I'd like to focus on the critical role of oral language competence for making the transition to literacy in the early years of school. This is a transition that many vulnerable young people do not manage, and there is a life-long cost associated with this.

What does oral language competence have to do with school success?

The answer to this question is two-fold: oral language competence (skill as a talker and as a listener) is essential if we are to establish close and meaningful relationships with others. Relationships with others are, of course, critical to our social and emotional wellbeing, right across the lifespan. Through friendships, we share our experiences via narratives, we give and receive advice, we share jokes, we empathise … the list goes on. As humans, we are "wired" to function in social groups, and we have evolved language as our tool for doing so, setting us apart from our closest evolutionary relatives, the apes.

Secondly, however, oral language competence forms the basis of the transition to literacy in the first three years of school. Learning how to read is fundamentally a linguistic task, so those children who are fortunate to enter school with well-developed skills in listening to and following the language of others have a natural, but hidden, head-start on those from households that for a range of reasons are verbally impoverished. Single-parent households, those in which parental mental health problems are present, and families that are chaotic and generally struggling to just survive, may not be able to provide the abundance of everyday language input that children need in order to be competent talkers and listeners before they arrive at school.

Ideally, children will have stories read to them from infancy and have warm, trusting relationships with adults in their world who spend time describing and explaining at the child's level. In reality, however, such experiences do not always characterise the early years, and a significant proportion of children arrive at school ill prepared for the enormous, life-changing task of "crossing the bridge" to literacy. Well-developed language skills on school entry equip children with the understanding that words are connected together for a variety of purposes, in many cases to narrate stories and share experiences. They also intuitively "know" something of the properties of words — that they can be segmented into smaller parts, that they sometimes rhyme and that they can be represented symbolically through text.

While learning how to talk is a biologically natural act (which, of course, requires exposure to the spoken word), learning how to read is an unnatural act that requires specific and sustained instruction. Unfortunately, many children enter school without the foundations in oral language competence that are needed for this transition, so they are not yet developmentally ready, because they need to develop the pre-requisite skills further. Such children will struggle with early reading and writing tasks in the classroom and are likely to develop an early dislike for school. If they are girls, they are at-risk of emotional difficulties, such as anxiety and depression, and may become almost invisible to the classroom teacher. If they are boys, there is a high risk that their discomfort will become externalised and will manifest as behavioural problems. Unfortunately, early years teachers do not receive adequate formal training about the important role played by oral language competence in the transition to literacy, and children who struggle with this are more likely to be labelled as having behavioural difficulties. There is a biblical reference in the literacy field to the "Matthew Principle" — the idea that the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer, and this is nowhere more true than in the case of children with poorly developed oral language skills who are struggling to make the transition to literacy. Let's not forget, too, that around Year 3 (the fourth year of formal schooling), there is a subtle but critical shift in emphasis in the classroom from learning to read to reading to learn. Those children who fail to achieve the former cannot possibly be expected to manage the latter, and it should be no surprise to us that they find school an alien, unrewarding and unhappy place to be.

PROPOSED ACTION

I would like to see the following changes made:

— Better pre-service preparation of primary school teachers about the critical role played by oral language competence in ensuring that children are developmentally ready to learn to read;

— A critical re-appraisal of why we call the first year of school in Victoria "Prep". This term is short for "preparatory", which I believe means there should be a focus on those skills and achievements that children need before they are tackling the formal curriculum. It is a chance to ensure more of a level starting point, but unfortunately the system currently requires teachers to "launch in" with reading instruction, irrespective of the child's readiness.

— Better recognition on the part of schools that educational success and mental health are close companions in the early years. If we genuinely do all we can to foster early educational achievement (and this may require a considerable re-think of current practices), then we stand to produce young people who have a better chance of overcoming early disadvantage and leaving school with rich spoken and written language skills, a strong sense of themselves and the capacity to develop marketable employment skills, so they can make a positive mark on the world.

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Rosa McKenna, Director of Communication in Education and Training Pty Ltd

Institutional ignorance

Aboriginal students are among the most disadvantaged in the Australian education system, despite laudable statements in key policy documents to bridge or close the gap in education outcomes and governments throwing huge amounts of money at "the problem". The first education goal for young Australians is that Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence. Among the features of such a system are the provision of schooling that is free from discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, pregnancy, culture, ethnicity, religion, health or disability, socioeconomic background or geographical location; and that schools build on local cultural knowledge and experience of Indigenous students as a foundation for learning and work in partnership with local communities on all aspects of the school process including to promote high expectation for the learning outcomes of Indigenous students (*Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians* 2008).

In 2007, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) committed to six ambitious targets to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage of which two relate to school education: halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children within a decade and halving the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 attainment rates or equivalent attainment by 2020. In the same year, the Australian Government embarked on a military-style intervention in the Northern Territory as an emergency response to a report on child abuse. Three years on, the *Productivity Commission Report* 2011 and the *The Northern Territory Emergency Response: Evaluation Report 2011* (Australian Government 2011) can show little progress on these measures.

Writing in *The Australian*, Professor Fiona Stanley and Dr Julie Coffin conclude from their research that "Many schools are not culturally safe places for Aboriginal young people due to systemic and institutional racism, and lack appropriate responses to these problems; i.e. they do not deal with them in ways that enable the young people to come back in to the school system" (Stanley and Coffin 2011) – so the failure of Indigenous students to attend and achieve comes as no surprise.

Let me be clear. I am not saying that people working in education are racist, but I want to put the case that many of the systemic structures in education policy and practice are racist and serve to alienate Indigenous and other minority students from participating. Policy makers continue to develop a-one-size-fits-all standard for measurement of both outcomes and professional performance while paying lip service to diversity. There is no differentiation that 'quality' in one context is disaster in another and that pedagogies and relationships need to be developed on the ground and in partnership with community.

There has been a consistent body of knowledge and research that makes the case and provides resources for a change in this direction (Mellor and Corrigan 2004). The 'Closing the Gap' effort is a mammoth task and a great opportunity; however, if we continue to ignore the research, not listen to the community, we will repeat the mistakes of the past with the same catastrophic outcomes.

One difficulty is that "literacy" is constructed in a monolingual framework. Literacy in English is all that counts (Cross 2008). The expertise that Australia once had in second language acquisition

has been mainstreamed, leaving teachers ill equipped to deal with learners from linguistic minorities. Secondly, Aboriginal peoples are treated as homogenous and the diversity of the contexts in which they live is not recognised. In gathering data about them and delivering education services to them, these differences are not disaggregated. In 1979, the National Aboriginal Education Committee developed a socio-geographic chart that distributed Indigenous communities into four categories that is still useful when thinking about education in these different contexts (Mellor and Corrigan 2004):

—CATEGORY 1
Traditional Oriented Communities where the local Indigenous vernacular is the common daily language

—CATEGORY 2
Rural Non Traditional communities where the common daily vernacular is English with a mixture of Indigenous words and Indigenous English (Indigenous languages, Aboriginal Englishes and Kriols)

—CATEGORY 3
Urban communities where the common daily vernacular is English

—CATEGORY 4
Urban dispersed Indigenous people, where the common daily vernacular is English.

Following on from this point, the standardised assessments that form the key indicator, such as NAPLAN, report only in bands of performance for English background students. It leads to an inaccurate picture of what counts as success, underrates the gains that these students make and overlooks their linguistic strengths. The reporting in categories of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous cements the stereotyping of Indigenous students as failures.

The Northern Territory school education system provides a unique case study of the intransigence of government policy in the face of overwhelming evidence and the wishes of communities. For learners in Category 1 communities, a multilingual or bilingual approach has been identified as being successful (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2011). The Northern Territory, however, continues to implement a policy — 'Compulsory teaching in English for the first four hours of each school day — which explicitly mandates English as the only language of instruction in the face of overwhelming research to the contrary, condemning students to years of a basic skills curriculum.

Charles E. Grimes has produced a comprehensive bibliography (Grimes 2009) comprising 691 items

in the international literature. He summarises the key research messages by quoting the World Bank: Children learn better if they understand the language spoken in school. This is a straightforward observation borne out by study after study (Thomas and Collier 1997; Dutcher 1995; Patrinos and Velez 1996; Walter 2003). Even the important goal of learning a second language is facilitated by starting with a language the children already know (Cummins 2000), and others provide convincing evidence of the principle of interdependence – that second language is helped, not hindered, by first-language study. This leads to a simple axiom: the first language is the language of learning. It is by far the easiest way for children to interact with the world. And when the language of learning and the language of instruction do not match, learning difficulties are bound to follow.

For 40 years, Aboriginal communities have expressed a consistent desire to transmit their languages and cultures to future generations within the school system. A statement by Elders on 4 November 2011 states these expectations, which agree completely with the research, and if this advice were taken, all schools would be meeting the goals for Australian schools.

The future is based on our children having a quality education, but to date this continues to be a systemic failure. A quality education for our people needs to include:

— bilingualism in schools to be returned and strengthened to ensure our children learn their traditional languages, dialects and cultural knowledges;

— attendances need to be rewarded, rather than children and families being punished for non-attendance;

— Aboriginal teachers in classrooms and school educational leadership roles are essential to building quality, localised schooling programs. This means also equal pay and entitlements, rewards and opportunities consistent with their important roles;

— curriculum needs to change and reflect traditional knowledges not just for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, but importantly for the broader Australian population who know very little about their own first peoples;

— Aboriginal teachers need to be treated fairly and equally compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts in delivering quality education to our children. This includes the opportunity to tell oral stories of Kinship, Creation Stories and about important cultural knowledge and skills.

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Professor Richard Teese, Director of the Centre for Research on Education Systems, University of Melbourne

Social disadvantage and state government funding approaches: what should be the priorities?

Since 2008, it has been possible to study at a national level the extent to which students differ in achievement and schools differ in performance. The most disturbing findings from NAPLAN are that children whose parents did not complete school are on average about two years behind children whose parents are university educated and that Indigenous children are still further behind. These gaps do not contract over stages of schooling. They tend to widen. Our schools are not strong enough to compress social differences in achievement, and they struggle to improve outcomes significantly for Indigenous children. While we can expect that children beginning school will be at different points of readiness, we might also expect that schools correct for these differences and enable all children to reach good standards in basic literacy and numeracy. But this is not the case. By Year 3, a very strong relationship can be observed between average achievement in NAPLAN and the social profile of a school.

If we are to value every child in school, we need to be able to explain why achievement gaps persist over stages of schooling and indeed expand. The purpose of school is not to mirror divisions in society, but to respect and cultivate the moral being of every child. Even before children start school, there are discernible differences in cognitive growth, speech development and social skills, and these "pre-school" differences widen in the first four years of life. But they widen still further as children progress through school. For we make progressively greater cognitive demands at higher levels of schooling, while the capacity of parents to support children's learning tends to decline. We ask more and more, but we do not provide enough support to counter the declining relative value of parents' cultural resources.

An important example is algebra. Many parents are unable to help their children with algebra, and this transfers the burden of teaching to teachers and fellow students. But if an appropriate level of support is not forthcoming — individual attention, pedagogical emphasis and approach, peer support, good materials — children will fall behind and rarely catch up. That this routinely happens is borne out by studies showing a deterioration in the academic confidence of students in doing mathematics in the early years of high school as well as falling interest.

Social inequalities in achievement arise because schools do not adequately adjust to cultural and economic differences between children, while making progressively greater demands on children's intellectual and social development. This failure to adjust should not be viewed as due simply to poorly performing schools. It is true that there are marked performance differences between schools, but much of this variation is associated with the social characteristics of individual students and the social profile of students as a group. The need for adjustment is a requirement, not only on individual schools, but also on the school system as a whole. School systems have a geography. They contain sites with very high concentrations of children in difficulty and experiencing multiple disadvantage and schools serving mainly prosperous and educated families and having few children who are failing. The adjustments through which school overcomes family disadvantage have to occur in the sites where disadvantage is concentrated, although adjustment to individual differences is required at all sites in a school system.

Since the mid-1970s, we have sought to make systemic adjustments to the performance of schools through targeted equity funding. Needs-based funding has been a running theme of education policy at a national level, but interpreted and applied in different ways and by no means consistently

with other policies, above all expanding "choice". States and territories operate equity policies, partly to allocate Commonwealth funding for equity, but partly also to adjust staffing formulas and provide more of their own resources to needier schools. How this is done varies by jurisdiction. However, the impact of equity adjustments to core funding appears to be very limited, to judge by the persistence of sharp social inequalities in achievement.

One factor that appears to work against policies of providing more staff to poorer schools is the hierarchical allocation of teaching resources by stage of schooling. Typically, secondary schools receive a much greater staff allocation than primary schools (and this is also true in some of the largest non-government systems in Australia). To quote from a recent study, "In 2005, for every dollar expended on each secondary student in the government sector, 80 cents were expended on each primary student. In the non-government sector, the ratio was $1: 66c" (Angus, Olney and Ainley 2007).

The reason for this difference in relative funding is the need to offer small specialist classes in the upper secondary years – classes that are more expensive to run. Other reasons include the faculty or discipline-based organisation of secondary schools and the arguably more complex social and emotional needs of adolescents as compared to younger children.

Over the long term, the discrepancy between primary and secondary school funding has been reduced, but it is still large. There is growing national pressure from school principals to increase funding for primary schools. Their challenges include the increasingly complex behavioural and health issues that young children present, the greater emphasis today on performance outcomes, and the need for all children to be well prepared for transition to secondary school.

State governments are placed in a difficult situation with respect to these competing claims, especially in a context of cutbacks in education spending. What considerations should guide their thinking? They should aim to ensure that all children make satisfactory progress in each broad stage of schooling so as to benefit fully from the opportunity and be ready for the next stage. They should ensure that all schools have adequate and suitable staffing to achieve this goal and that teachers have enough release time for intensive work with individual students as well as for their own professional learning. Equity funding should be concentrated in the most disadvantaged schools rather than thinly dispersed over a large number of schools. Smaller and poorer secondary schools should be compensated for the higher costs they incur in

running small, specialist classes. Finally, a major effort needs to be made to train teachers to work in disadvantaged settings. This will help ensure that each dollar spent will be well spent.

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Dr Vanlyn Davy, formerly Chief Education Officer: Equity and Distance Education Programs, NSW Department of Education and Training (1990–2005)

Schooling: students of low socioeconomic status
'SHAKY' RESEARCH AND RESISTANCE

Educational researchers and authorities are interested in what factors make schools effective. Sometimes, as a consequence of management competence but often in response to political pressures, they have become concerned to know how schools can be effective for identifiable groups of students, including:

— the advantaged, such as:

- the "gifted and talented" students

- the already academically proficient students

— the disabled, such as:

- intellectually disabled students

- physically disabled students

— otherwise disadvantaged students, such as:

- Aboriginal students

- low socioeconomic status (SES) students

- immigrant students

- geographically isolated students

- students whose circumstances preclude school attendance

- girls … and then boys.

Of these, by far the greatest "load" on the schooling system (and diminished potential for the nation's social and economic vitality) is the relative failure of low SES students (Davy 2008). This load falls most

heavily, and overwhelmingly and ever-increasingly so, on public schooling systems. Public schools do the "heavy lifting" (Davy 2005). Low SES as a matter of policy concern was dramatically highlighted in the Karmel Report of 1973, which spawned the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP). The DSP was envisaged as:

a. a device for action-researching multiple areas of low SES schooling, including curriculum structure and content; teacher training, ongoing teacher education; the nature of disadvantage, good pedagogy … all of it with a view to "empowerment";

b. a means by which the bigger system could learn how to provide better schooling for low SES students (in all of the abovementioned areas) and, as a consequence of the lessons learned, to systematise the lessons learned away from DSP provision and into mainstream provision: funding, staffing, curriculum structure and content, teacher education and so on.

Rather than the hoped-for partnership between large state departments of public schooling and the federally funded DSP, the complexities (and structural conservatism) of federalism mixed with departmental ignorance and hostility resulted in the DSP treated by departments as a hostile intrusion, then it was run parallel to state systems' policies, then diluted to a literacy and numeracy program for low SES schools … with its name changed to various euphemisms.

State departments throttled the DSP and its interest in researching all major arms of systems' schooling policy with a view to providing intrinsic value to low SES students — an enterprise requiring multi-disciplinary skills, knowledge and empathy, including those falling within the domain of "political understandings" — … and replaced it with a mix of two doubtful assertions:

— "the curriculum that low SES kids need the most is literacy" … and, later "numeracy" — an assertion that side-stepped and ignored the pedagogically based argument that literacy is best learned with reference to matters of high interest, personal empowerment and intrinsic value.

— "what really matters is teacher quality" … — an assertion addressed below.

The rout of the DSP and its replacement with a pallid and woolly-headed "successor" took 23 years of bureaucratic manoeuvering and skirmishes in NSW (the last state to surrender). Any gains made for low SES students between 1973 and 1996 were gains made because of the persistent and thoughtful efforts of teachers and schools made possible by the research-encouraging, federally funded DSP (and industrial action around staffing and class size) and despite the efforts of the state department, which resisted, resisted, resisted!

Now, in 2008–12, a progressive and genuinely interested Commonwealth Government, wanting to drive funds to where it is needed most, must rely on the advice and "research" that is coming from these very same state departments … and a handful of researchers who have managed comprehensively to splice their "research" into the conservative (and wrong-headed) mind-set of state departments.

The most influential of these researchers has been Rowe who, in 2003, expressed surprise at the current "shakiness of our knowledge about educational effectiveness in terms of both experiences and outcomes of schooling" (Rowe 2003. p 15). He didn't allow this shakiness to deter him from asserting that what "really matters" (his emphasis) is teacher quality. In his essay, Rowe helpfully traced the development of our understandings of school effectiveness right up to our current "shaky" state-of-affairs. He showed how it grew out of studies of educational effectiveness by those interested in equity, including Coleman et al. (1966) and Jencks et al. (1972), and he reported that their findings "were interpreted as casting serious doubts on the capacity of schools to make a difference relative to the influence of the socio-cultural and economic capital of home background" (Rowe 2003. p 16). To counter this conclusion, Rowe referenced many researchers whose work provided evidence that "attests to the effects of schooling on student learning outcomes" and which Rowe dubbed the "optimistic account" of school effectiveness research, which, in summary, includes five factors: (1) purposeful educational leadership; (2) challenging teaching and high expectations of students; (3) involvement of and consistency among teachers; (4) a positive and orderly climate; (5) frequent evaluation of student progress (Rowe 2003, p. 17).

Rowe is not greatly impressed by the optimistic account, claiming it is based on an "extremely fragile research base" (Rowe 2003, p. 17) and preferring to see future success for students and schools as more likely in studies that show between-class/teacher variance, which, according to Rowe, can be explained in terms of "teacher quality and instructional effectiveness" (Rowe 2003, p. 18).

So, we have a contest of ideas that we need to scrutinise because, as Amosa et al. (2007) summarise, Australia's several public schooling systems have invested large amounts of research

and training resources and energy into this area, believing, like Rowe, that teacher quality and not socioeconomic and cultural differences is "what really matters". At one end of this contestation are researchers such as Rothstein (2004) who argues that low SES must produce a big average achievement gap and that good teaching to both low SES students and high SES students will produce better results for both groups but do little to close the gap between them. Standing against this argument are those who regard "teacher quality" as the key.

Rowe (2003) declares that teacher quality is "what really matters". He is unequivocal about this. He dismisses "traditional" views and "prevailing" understandings as "dogmas" and separates out for special scorn research concerning sociocultural and socioeconomic factors, describing these "traditional and prevailing" views as "products of methodological and statistical artefact, amounting to little more than 'religious' adherence to moribund ideologies of biological and social determinism" (Rowe 2003, p. 15). While acknowledging some minor influence of "background and intake characteristics", he says that "the magnitude of these effects pale into insignificance compared with class/teacher effects" (Rowe's emphasis). Intriguingly, this once influential researcher of Australia's education research headquarters (that is, ACER) acknowledges the "shakiness of our knowledge about educational effectiveness in terms of both experiences and outcomes of schooling for students, teachers, parents and the wider community", while making the intimidating assertion teacher quality is what "really matters" (p. 15, Rowe's emphasis).

My own view is that the shaky nature of the research is a clue that the matter is complex and that simplistic assertions drive us educators up expensive dry gullies, and more importantly, leave low SES kids wallowing in relative ignorance and misery. That "teacher quality" in a learning industry is important, even very important, appears to me to be a no-brainer. That different groups of students generate different schooling outcomes suggests that different forces are at work and that the definition of a "quality teacher" may depend on the teachers' understanding of cultural contexts, a commitment to social justice objectives, an empathic understanding of the forces of disempowerment and liberation, among other matters requiring a political understanding and empathy.

It occurs to me that the effect of a high-quality teacher will be seriously discounted in a system that is clearly insensitive to matters of equity and encouragingly tolerant of reproduced power and privilege. It is also apparent that disdainful approaches to all but one area of "effectiveness" have the effects of:

— denying other possible areas associated with low SES schooling outcomes and starving them of essential research encouragement and funding;

— protecting systems and their leadership from the onerous task of, with low SES outcomes in focus, questioning system level policies and procedures (such as purposes of schooling; identification of schooling outcomes with intrinsic value; curriculum structure; curriculum content; other major arms aligned accordingly);

— placing the onus (blame) for poor outcomes on schools and teachers.

In other words, the inconclusive ("shaky") nature of research into educational effectiveness may lead, as Rowe asserts, to the unshakeable view that it is teacher quality that really matters, but it is just as likely, and in my (experienced) view, intuitively more likely to be true that teaching quality is dependent on a range of factors including:

— easy-to-understand factors: quality of pre-service and in-service teacher training/education; children's state of hunger and/or cold; class size; and differential funding.

— difficult to understand factors: cultural understandings; and culturally inclusive curriculum and curriculum materials.

— intellectually challenging factors — not for the lazy or willfully ignorant: the nature of low SES life and struggle; the meaning of "intrinsic value" for low SES students; pedagogically appropriate consequences for curriculum structure (subjects, topics, cross-curriculum, multi-disciplinary) … and content (that which is socioeconomically empowering); and a cascade of consequential reviews of ALL major arms of system and school policies, structures and procedures.

COMPLEXITIES

"Those people have fat stomachs so they should do stomach exercises."

"Low SES students have low literacy rates so they should be taught more literacy."

Those people also have sedentary jobs, sedentary lifestyles, ignorance concerning appropriate diet and nourishment, undiagnosed fatty livers, clogged blood vessels, hip and knee degeneration, early onset of diabetes and probably a lot more … but they have been prescribed stomach exercises … good for stomach muscles but a strategy leaving unaddressed the main health issues. Low SES students have many more important and debilitating characteristics than poor literacy outcomes. Like the stronger stomach

muscles, better literacy outcomes will not be harmful, indeed be beneficial … but even this benefit is subject to at least two critiques:

— better literacy (and numeracy) outcomes may be more quickly and comprehensively achieved if literacy was taught with reference to matters of "intrinsic value" to low SES students. If this were so, then we now have the cart before the horse. Serious research required here;

— the teaching will need to be undertaken by good teachers, "good" defined as a proficiency in literacy methodology aligned to a saturated understanding of low SES characteristics, the pathways to overcome low SES and the connectedness of literacy learning to social and economic empowerment (intrinsic value).

But, it is not immediately obvious that being low SES and literate/numerate (whatever the definition and standard) will be enough. Entry to high status university streams requires high performance in a range of senior school subjects that most low SES students never get to experience. By the time they are old enough to exercise a "choice" between these subjects in Year 11, they have either left school (the majority) or are so entirely damaged they have no option but to allow themselves to be steered into courses for the "non-university oriented" and "not academically inclined" and "less able" and "not academically proficient" … all euphemisms as the data-sets reveal for Indigenous and other low SES students who have failed to achieve well enough in earlier schooling.

Thus, the remedy must necessarily be found from the earliest years of schooling … and in an across-the-curriculum manner. This does not intuitively suggest literacy programs for low SES students, even if taught by teachers deemed by the system to be high quality, and especially when the bureau responsible for teacher quality (in NSW, the Institute of Teachers), while specifically designating special skills, knowledge and experience for Indigenous, immigrant and disabled students, fails to recognise low SES as an issue, thus providing official sanction to the view that a good teacher in a high SES school has nothing additional of real consequence to deal with in a low SES school! Bizarre!

So, currently, with urgings from the state departments, the Commonwealth Government is providing very sizeable amounts of additional funds to low SES schools … to fund narrowly conceived literacy and numeracy programs taught by teachers found to be good teachers but not with reference to any low SES criteria. The systems have no pressure on them to seriously review the major arms of schooling policy as the problem of "equity" is supposedly found at the school level (teacher quality).

SO, WHERE IS THE REMEDY?

I have been asked to document my remedy for low SES underachievement, which is difficult to do in this small space. However, I have done so at great length in my PhD thesis of 2008 (Davy 2008). In a nutshell:

1. A full review: the whole system must be reviewed for all students. Why?

    First, because it is neither nationally Australian nor socially purposeful. It is fractured along state, territory, religious, socioeconomic boundaries … and it has no political purpose to guide its development. Secondly, because the same things that are knocking low SES kids out of senior schooling (poor curriculum structure, which precludes good pedagogy; boredom; perceived irrelevance) or into lower-status streams are slowing down and limiting the rest.

2. Collaboration and Social Purposes of Schooling: when reviewing the whole system we need, like any properly managed enterprise, to collaborate (not weakly "consult") with the stakeholders (the public) and devise an agreed set of enterprise goals, or, given the nature of our enterprise, we could call them "social purposes" of schooling. A healthy body of literature describing the advantages, and processes for, a "deliberative democracy" exists. The process is achievable and exciting in prospect … and strongly legitimising in effect. In the absence of an existing set of Social Purposes, it is difficult to say what the public might determine, but it is likely to address macro and highly political issues such as:

— a preferred type of political system and processes for Australia;

— a preferred type of economic system for Australia;

— preferred characteristics of Australian society;

— guaranteed "liberal" rights of individuals in Australia;

— guaranteed human rights;

— preferred environmental outcomes;

— social justice;

— preferred conditions for family and community and groups within communities;

— preferred international relations.

The set of Schooling Purposes need not be extensive or detailed because they are no more than

directional guidelines designed to steer those with industry-specific responsibilities towards a common set of societal objectives.

3. Alignment: with the social purposes of schooling agreed and set in a publicly supported and politically legitimised Charter, bureaux would be charged with aligning all of their major policy arms to these purposes … under the supervision of the stakeholders.

4. Curriculum: the central policy arm "Curriculum" will be concerned with:

   a. an Essential layer: the Social Purposes of Schooling used to generate an Essential Curriculum for approximately 50 per cent of school time, for all students in all schools from Pre-school to Year 12 … envisaged to be entirely cross-curriculum, high interest, real world (and, because of its genesis, of intrinsic value to those from disempowered socioeconomic circumstances);

   b. an Elective layer: the remaining 50 per cent of school time will be used to provide curriculum choice for all students in all schools from Pre-school to Year 12 … envisaged to be overwhelmingly comprised of conventional subject disciplines, but also including sectarian studies (and, because of its explicit provision to students to exercise power, of intrinsic value to those from disempowered socioeconomic circumstances);

   c. a requirement of Curriculum authorities, both Commonwealth and state/territory, to jettison policies that view curriculum content as "neutral" and all equity concerns for "the teacher to address".

WHAT MIGHT THE CURRICULUM WITH "INTRINSIC VALUE" LOOK LIKE?

The exact look of the resulting Essential Curriculum layer cannot be known until after serious research is completed, but, in respect of whatever results, I suggest the following directions could be pursued to develop intrinsic value for low SES students:

1. The Essential layer would not be a separate curriculum for low SES students.

2. Intrinsic Value in both the Essential and Elective layers: for low SES students it would have an additional aim associated with it. This aim would have a socio-politico-educational purpose. Following the lead of feminist educators in the 1980s, a distinctly political but curriculum-related objective could be adopted for low SES students. To steal from the first priority of the National Plan for Girls, we could urge that low SES students be taught, from the earliest years, the full range of adult roles open to all students and the full range of educational pathways to those adult roles.

3. Intrinsic Value in the Essential layer: the national curriculum authority (ACARA) would identify on its syllabus websites themes/knowledge/skills/topics that ACARA believes hold intrinsic value for low SES students. ACARA's judgement could be informed by advice from a low SES advisory group. As an example, ACARA could take a conceptual lead from an outcome of the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) of the 1980s that gathered inner-city Sydney teachers together with parents to collaborate on the identification of curriculum areas, lesson plans and curriculum materials deemed to be empowering and essential for the development of low SES children. They came up with SPOTE:

   S — social
   P — political
   O — organisational
   T — technological
   E — economic … knowledge, skills and understandings.

4. Intrinsic Value in the Essential layer: ACARA (and schools) could employ the SPOTE strategy through Years P–12 … with developmentally appropriate increases of sophistication each year.

5. Intrinsic Value in the Elective layer: the two-layer curriculum paradigm will permit the exercise of choice by all students from pre-school to Year 12. Choice is empowering. With curriculum choice currently denied to students until the senior years, most low SES students and Indigenous students miss out. They leave school before "choice" kicks in. Choice, for them, is often the relief of finding a curriculum stream they can engage with — ironically, a separate curriculum, and less powerful, designed euphemistically for the "non-university oriented" or the "non-academically inclined" — overwhelmingly low SES and Indigenous. But, these students' educational damage is so replete by the senior years that they have little option — leave school or exercise the limited choice open to them. Choice, for them, is the safety net of lesser-status subjects. It is an injustice that the students who most need explicitly designed experiences to engender empowerment are so comprehensively denied the empowerment of curriculum choice, from the earliest years, because of the manner in which curriculum is structured. Choice has value to all children, but choice for the disempowered has intrinsic value. Choice, negotiated between schools and parents/students (depending on their age) should be introduced from the earliest years

There is more, much more, to discuss. I have covered those matters I believe to be the most important politico-educational matters in Australia in my thesis (Davy 2008).

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'Fixing' inequities in schooling: framing the discourse

Four years ago, the OECD reported that Australia was lagging behind many other developed countries in "levels of educational access by the more disadvantaged":

> The differences in academic performance between our highest and lowest performing students (and even between the lowest and the median) are large in Australia and more dependent on the influence of class, family and social background than in many other countries such as Canada, Ireland, Austria, Korea, Finland and other Scandinavian countries. The OECD puts us in the 'high quality/low equity' box in its international comparisons of reading literacy. (Argy 2007)

In November of this year, Richard Teese reported:

> The most disturbing findings from NAPLAN are that children whose parents did not complete school are on average about two years behind children whose parents are university-educated, and that indigenous children are still further behind. These gaps do not contract over stages of schooling. They tend to widen. (Teese 2011)

How, then, to "fix" the lack of equity in Australian education?

Do we confine ourselves to the education policy environment and concentrate on inequities within that environment? Or do we take general equity as the primary focus and discover how improving education for all students could contribute to fairer outcomes right across our society — for example, in increased health levels, fairer access to housing, a less skewed mix in the composition of prison populations, more young people adequately prepared for 21st century employment?

Of course, we must do both, but all too often — not the least because of the strength of teachers in education policy environments (especially Labor ones) — we are encouraged to believe that it is the schooling system that is exclusively responsible for delivering fairness as between students.

And yet education policy cannot — in and of itself — dissolve the gap between students' schooling outcomes. Every parent in remote Australia knows that an Indigenous child with hearing or eye diseases can't focus fully on the task of learning until those health problems are solved. Every teacher whose school is in a disadvantaged area of the city or state knows that, for a secondary school student who never gets breakfast or who doesn't have a home, or even a place to study, or who, like some of Dr Campbell's participants, is a 'resi' kid, or who is wrestling with a drug or alcohol problem — merely surviving the school day, let alone making concrete learning gains, will be a huge challenge. By contrast, everyone knows that students who are well resourced and have wide opportunities will almost always do better at school than those who are less fortunate.

The problems that disadvantaged students encounter every day — and that are exacerbated

by our continuing failure, over several decades, to try seriously to reduce inequities within and between our schools — are no longer a matter primarily for educationists.

So obvious has this fact become that we are now beginning to hear people from outside the education system voicing their concerns. Most recently, Jennifer Westacott, chief executive of the Business Council of Australia, called for an investigation by the Productivity Commission of "the sources and extent of entrenched disadvantage and the most effective means of breaking these cycles" (Westacott 2011). The Henderson Poverty Inquiry occurred nearly 40 years ago (Commonwealth Commission of Inquiry into Poverty 1973). Ms Westacott's call for a Productivity Commission Inquiry is timely: a national assault on general disadvantage in Australia may very well deliver more promising strategies for narrowing the education gap than is possible for education policy-makers alone.

In the meantime, though, the education system cannot be allowed to relax its own efforts to achieve a greater measure of fairness — between geographical locations, school systems, individual schools and the individual students within those schools.

Discussions about equity within the education system seem recently to have shrunk to concerns — albeit well founded — about the allocation of government funding between schools. At this moment, schools across the country are waiting to see whether or not the Gonski Review has been capable of resisting the immense lobbying of the historically active schools interest groups in order to offer progressive recommendations for the reform of the current — deeply flawed — school funding system.

Those concerned about equity across schools are hoping that Gonski has found a way to implement the pre-requisite for a genuinely fair system, that is, that the bulk of public resources should go to the schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantaged students. This is what is needed to ensure that schools are able to compensate for the lack of social capital among their families. It's needed to provide the extra individual help that will make the difference between a child "catching on" to maths or abandoning the effort for life. Or to equip the students whose families can't afford books or computers. Or to "buy in" ancillary services when the school needs them — like personal support for children from turbulent family situations. Or to quietly pay the school excursion fee of the kids who otherwise would have to stay home. Or to mentor or professionally develop teachers who need extra, specialised assistance to become more effective with "their" particular students.

It's to be hoped, too, that Gonski will avoid being seduced into believing that equity considerations can be dealt adequately with by means of compensatory programs. The most recognised Australian example — the Disadvantaged Schools Program, introduced by the Commonwealth in 1974 and lasting until 1990 — was greatly valued by the schools that were lucky enough to be its funding recipients. There were not many of these: at its zenith, the DSP accounted for only 2 per cent of government outlays on schooling, and the impact on overall levels of disadvantage — even in the participating schools — was, at best, debatable. Schools that "just missed out" (for example, because of slight demographic changes affecting their eligibility) became disenchanted, and few seriously believed that adding this "equity pimple" to the "funding pumpkin" was going to effectively change patterns of disadvantage across all schools: it was the "pumpkin" that should have been changed!

Perhaps the most effective feature of the DSP for its recipients was that its dollars were discretionary: many interesting classroom-level innovations resulted from teachers having a rare say in how small grants might be applied to their particular circumstances and their particular students.

At the state level, governments have to be challenged when they choose to cut funding for programs and sectors (like the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning and TAFE) that are designed to ensure that students who choose (for example, because "you're treated as an adult") — or who are forced (for example, because "school is not for everyone") as two digital storytelling participants said — to take up employment-related studies are successfully prepared for the modern labour market. Such challenges will fail if mounted solely by groups from the education sector — routinely suspected by governments as costing much but delivering little in the way of tangible political kudos. The efforts of schools and other educational institutions to forge partnerships with business and industry policy bodies concerned about productivity and skills shortages can lend weight to the education sector's own lobbying efforts.

Finally, it's possible that an important blow for educational equity might be struck by supporting parents to participate more fully in their children's education. Professor Teese's statistic on the relative advantage of students from university-educated families sharply highlights the lived experience of Dr Campbell's student participants, one at least of whom commented on "being allowed to make the mistake of leaving school too early" and several of whom clearly lacked parental or other advocates in the face of unmotivated and unimaginative

teaching, being ignored when reporting bullying, or failure to follow up other complaints — or simply "not being noticed". Many schools have been able to encourage parents to become more involved in their children's schooling — with pay-offs in terms of their developing a better understanding of the curriculum and confidence in approaching teachers. But such "extra tasks" for schools require "extra bodies" (not always qualified teachers) to make contact, interpret, communicate with families and other significant people outside the school — and thus require extra resources. In the writer's experience, it is rare for schools that have been able to afford these extra resources to report that the investment has not paid off in terms of better relationships between students, families and the school.

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