

The Pandemic and Educational Inequality in Australia: Timely Opportunity to Reform Education

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School closures in Australia not only exposed the persistence of educational inequality, but exacerbated it through remote learning, which relied on family support and material and technological resources available in the home and at the school. The abrupt and unprepared shift in delivery mode differentially disrupted and interrupted student learning. The heightened public awareness of the damaging effect of educational inequality provides an historic opportunity to reform education by: linking schools, parents and communities ensuring inclusive provision for all students; investing in equitable and accessible digital learning; and advocating for resourcing to meet the needs of all students and schools.

Keywords: educational inequality, remote & online learning, education reform, pandemic

INTRODUCTION

Debate about socio-economic educational inequality has a long history in Australia, dating back to the Karmel Report (Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission 1973) which reflected similar patterns of educational disadvantage identified by Coleman (1966) in the US and Plowden (1967) in England. Despite efforts to address educational inequality in Australia, it continues to persist as evident, for example, by Australia's 2018 Performance for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, indicating that 24 percent of advantaged students were top performers in reading compared with six percent of disadvantaged students. This result reflects a performance gap related to socio-economic status of 90 score points compared with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] average of 87 score points (OECD, 2018, p.1). The persistence of educational inequality in Australia is reflected in the research literature, highlighting the positive relationship between not only socio-economic status of students and their educational achievement but also the level of socio-educational advantage at the school and students' academic achievement (e.g. Chesters & Daly, 2018). It is also evident in longstanding debates in Australia regarding approaches to school resourcing (Gonski, Boston, Greiner, Lawrence, Scales, & Tannock, 2011).

School closures, aiming to contain the spread of the coronavirus, have exposed the differential access to resources by students, families and schools within and across educational systems and raised concerns about the exacerbation of educational inequality as a result of the unintended consequences of the delivery of remote learning (e.g. research reports submitted to the Australian Government in April 2020: Australian Centre for Educational Research [ACER] 2020; Brown, te Riele, Shelley & Woodroffe 2020; Clinton 2020; Drane, Vernon & O'Shea, 2020; Finkel, 2020; Lamb, 2020). More than ever, differential access to critical resources and learning opportunities outside of the school have become evident in the public domain (e.g.

ACER, 2020; Martinez, 2020). Reville (n.d. in Mineo, 2020) argues that the exposure of educational inequality is analogous to a sudden tidal wave ‘revealing all these uncomfortable realities that had been beneath the water from time immemorial’ (para., 24).

School closures highlighted out of school factors contributing to student learning and engagement, such as, ‘families’ time, income, and human, social, and psychological capital are differentially distributed across and within families’ (ACER 2020, p.11) and put a spotlight on the influence of family financial resources, educational background and occupation on not only educational outcomes but also employment, health and welfare outcomes.

School responses to the pandemic crisis revealed the differential level of resources available to families and schools within and across systems and nations, contributing to the differential access by students to teacher expertise, resources, curriculum and diagnostic and assessment services (Mineo, 2020; Wayman, 2020). The exposure of this resourcing gap between schools highlighted the role of the school as either reproducer of educational inequality or facilitator of social mobility and equitable educational outcomes. The latter role is essential for developing students’ human capital necessary for social, economic and political life and social mobility (Pfeffer, 2015).

School closures revealed the ways in which schools not only produce educational outcomes but also create significant social spaces (Anderson, 2020) enabling connections to develop and relationships to build, thereby, supporting student and community engagement, retention, wellbeing and resilience (ACER, 2020). Moreover, school closures revealed the critical role of the teaching profession, in particular, the service it provides to communities with high concentrations of socio-economic disadvantage. In these contexts, it is challenged to respond to a complex range of demands and needs (Maxouris & Yu, 2020), for example, in meeting nutrition, safety and wellbeing needs (Anderson, 2020) and supporting positive student and teacher relationships and student engagement in learning (ACER, 2020).

Concern was expressed in Australia (e.g. ACER, 2020; Drane, Vernon, O’Shea, 2020; Lamb, 2020) and internationally (e.g. Anderson, 2020; Bergamini, 2020; Mineo, 2020; Saavedra, 2020; Wayman, 2020) about the unintended consequences of school closures. Although Australia, like other countries, kept schools partially open to support students unable to access remote learning (Drane et al., 2020), the consensus view is that remote learning had the potential to further exacerbate differences and disparities and increase inequality (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). Outlined below are three factors contributing to the exacerbation of educational inequality: reliance on family support and material resources; reliance on internet and technology; and differential impact of disrupted and interrupted learning.

RELiance ON FAMILY SUPPORT AND MATERIAL RESOURCES

The delivery of remote learning leverages on the home – school partnership, requiring greater level of input from families, both for basic material resources and human resources (Lamb, 2020). Hence, the significance of material resources is enhanced, requiring families to have suitable technology, reliable broadband internet, physical spaces, and other resources essential for learning (Brown et al. 2020; Finkel 2020). As evident by a recent United Kingdom study, lower income level families were less likely to purchase additional material to support remote learning during the pandemic than those with middle income levels (Finkel, 2020).

Moreover, the role of parents in the education of students was enhanced during school closures. Parents were required to provide: an environment conducive to learning, through provision of material resources and application of educational skills and knowledge (Saavedra, 2020); and a greater level of support through investment of their time in motivating and supervising learning (Brown, te Riele, Shelley, & Woodroffe, 2020; Toth-Stub, 2020). Undoubtedly, this new expectation placed a greater level of burden on families and students from low socio-economic backgrounds, given the differential level of resources, time available and capacities to support learning (ACER, 2020; Brown et al., 2020; Mineo, 2020).

RELIANCE ON INTERNET AND TECHNOLOGY

Whilst remote learning provided teachers with the potential to sustain learning and engagement (Toth-Stub, 2020), as Schleicher (n.d. in Anderson, 2020) observes that ‘optimism for technology uptake is paired with pessimism about what this means for equity’ (para., 15). Remote learning depended on student access to: technological resources (Lamb, 2020), technological ‘know-how’ at home (Noble, 2020); school technical infrastructure (ACER, 2020; Anderson, 2020); and teacher capability in delivering online learning, in terms of experience, knowledge, skills, and attitude (ACER, 2020; Lamb, 2020; Toth-Stub, 2020).

Learning from home requires students to have access to ‘a computer, a reliable internet connection (with adequate speed and data), and, for some, specific software’ (Noble, 2020, para. 10). Yet, even in Australia where ‘access to digital technologies and the internet is high’ (ACER, 2020, p.1), students from low socio economic backgrounds, many of whom are already facing barriers to learning, are more likely to experience limited access to technological resources (ACER, 2020; Clinton, 2020; Drane et al., 2020; Noble, 2020). For instance, the 2019 Australian Digital Inclusion Index (in ACER, 2020, p.8) measuring accessibility, affordability and ability, highlights widening equity gaps for social groups, in relations to these measures. Similarly, Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicate that ‘low-income households and those in remote areas have on average half as many desktop, laptop or tablet computers as middle-income households’ (Finkel, 2020, p.3). Hence, students from low income families are more likely to rely on mobile connection to access the internet, placing them at a disadvantage (ACER, 2020, p.8). The closure of libraries also limited the capacity for students to access technology by sharing data and devices using public facilities (Noble, 2020).

DIFFERENTIAL IMPACT OF DISRUPTED AND INTERRUPTED LEARNING

The widespread global disruption and interruption to student learning is another significant factor exacerbating educational inequality, caused by the sudden closure of schools and transition to remote learning. As Lamb (2020) argues, most schools ‘were completely unprepared’ (p. 2) for remote learning, requiring them to consider the capacities and resources available in both the home and school as well as the readiness and capacity of students to make the transition to remote learning. It was evident that this transition to remote learning was problematic for younger students in early childhood and primary education and educationally, socially and emotionally vulnerable students across all year levels (ACER, 2020).

Lamb (2020) identifies an ‘adjustment divide’ (p. 3) to refer to the differential requirement of adjustment needed to experience success in remote learning. Hence, vulnerable groups (Brown et al., 2020), such as, low socio economically disadvantaged students, and those from Aboriginal and rural communities were identified as being at risk due to the disruption of additional educational, social and emotional services previously accessed. The capacity for students to adjust to remote learning depends also on students’ readiness to learn remotely. It requires a relevant knowledge, skills and dispositions (Lamb 2020), such as, time management, and motivation to learn (Anderson, 2020), and most significantly, digital- literacy skills (Noble, 2020). According to Noble (2020, para. 8), 2018 PISA results indicate that ‘27 per cent of Australian 15-year-olds have low digital-literacy skills by international standards’, making online learning more problematic for them, leading researchers, such as, Brown et al. (2020) and Anderson (2020) to argue for the importance of addressing the limitations of online learning.

There are concerns that disrupted learning will lead to: loss of learning that will need to be recovered (Brown et al., 2020, p.20; Saavedra, 2020); increased level of educational disengagement (Drane et al. 2020; Saavedra, 2020); higher drop-out rates (Saavedra, 2020); increased psychosocial challenges (Drane et al., 2020); and social isolation and disconnection (ACER, 2020). The overall impact of these consequences is the exacerbation of educational inequality, due to the increased size of the vulnerable group and the degree of vulnerability of students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Clinton, 2020; Drane et al., 2020; Finkel, 2020; Lamb, 2020). Brown et al. (2020, p. 5) estimate that ‘46 percent of the student

population' in Australia is considered to be vulnerable, from an educational, health, social and emotional perspective.

TIMELY OPPORTUNITY TO REFORM EDUCATION

The immediate priority for schools during the pandemic in Australia was to effectively facilitate continuity in learning and manage disruption using best available technological resources, whilst recognising local, national and global strengths and constraints (ACER, 2020; Drane et al., 2020; Lamb, 2020; Martinez, 2020). Clinton (2020, p.7) outlines principles underpinning an effective approach to institutional recovery based on lessons from natural disasters, such as, floods and bushfires. In essence, these principles emphasise the importance of a planned, coordinated and responsive approach to delivery of educational services. They reflect leaders' recognition of the complexity of situations; the importance of communicating, working collaboratively and enhancing the relationship with families and the community; and the significance of building on the strengths of students, families, schools and communities, identified through a process of diagnosis and assessment of needs and impacts.

Central to a recovery approach is the importance of providing intervention support to students at risk (ACER, 2020; Drane et al., 2020; Martinez, 2020) by: addressing pressing and basic needs (ACER, 2020); maintaining connection or reconnecting with students (ACER, 2020; Brown et al., 2020); continually diagnosing learning needs (Clinton, 2020); and actively engaging students, through individualised learning (Brown et al., 2020). As Brown et al. (2020) stress, devising an equitable approach during the pandemic is challenging and requires schools to find the right balance between meeting the urgent needs of vulnerable groups and advancing learning for all students.

However, the desire to restore the operation of schools is natural, but this large-scale disruption to the delivery of education, not seen since World War II (Martinez, 2020), also provides an opportunity for leaders in Australia to shift the existing educational paradigm. Can this health crisis bring about real change to ensure that schools facilitate social mobility and equitable educational outcomes? Is there a case for redesigning educational delivery to enable the achievement of the twin goals of educational quality and equity for all students, within an ever-changing and unpredictable environment (Mineo, 2020)? Has this experience of remote learning stimulated and inspired a desire for change (Maxouris & Yu, 2020)? Does the increased public awareness of educational inequality provide a moral purpose, ensuring that education works for all students, irrespective of their social background? Moreover, does this crisis put the spotlight on the value of 'equality' and the importance of advancing it to secure a sustainable future?

Some key themes underpinning these questions include: the importance of being prepared for the emergency delivery of education, as there are risks associated with crisis management; and the importance of ensuring that learning outcomes are of quality and equitable. This means that educational provision needs to be evidence-based, inclusive of all students through the design of relevant programmes and the creation of a supportive climate and environment for learning that includes additional and targeted intervention learning to effectively cater for needs.

Investment in digital learning and the promotion of equitable access to technological resources is also critical in an unpredictable and changing environment. There is need to ensure the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment is inclusive of all students, and that it builds relevant student knowledge, skills and dispositions. Also important is the equitable investment in school technical infrastructure and teacher and parent education, to facilitate confidence building and skill development. Moreover, the effective resourcing of the delivery of educational provision to achieve quality and equity goals is essential and has implications for the role of leaders in advocating for systemic reform and needs-based funding approaches that are responsive to diverse student populations. A significant theme is the enhanced importance of 'linking schools with parents and communities' (OECD, 2012, p.12), through relationship and partnerships building, given the centrality of the role of parents, families and communities in the education of students and the need for schools to support this essential role.

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