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Education Inequity

Amplify Insights: Education Inequity

Part One: Drivers of Inequity

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Education Inequity

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2. Executive Summary

'Education breaks the shackles of disadvantage and empowers those who live without privilege.'[1]

Factors that students do not have control over should not predetermine educational outcomes for individual students or groups of students.

Equity in education matters because it improves the quality of life of individuals, supports social mobility, and reduces public costs to society. Moreover, it matters because the Australian public, including young people themselves, recognise equity as an important tenet of the Australia they desire to live, learn and succeed in.

Existing testing measures do not capture holistic learning experiences that occur both inside and outside education settings. They also do not capture all the key objectives as set out in the school education system, to do with promoting active citizenship and societal engagement. Disenfranchised students in vulnerable contexts are more likely to fare worse in participation and engagement in schooling and in achieving minimum proficiency standards in their learning compared to the national average.

To ensure equity for every young person in Australia, we need to not only improve outcomes of those who routinely perform less well than their peers but also provide quality learning opportunities for all students for greater and inclusive societal engagement. More learning opportunities and experiences need to be created both inside and outside education settings for each young person to thrive.

Paying particular attention to selected demographic groups known to face barriers to educational participation, the **Amplify Insights: Education Inequity Report** utilises an inclusive systems approach to propose changes in practice and policymaking to remove education inequity in the early, middle and senior years of learning.

Part one (Drivers of Inequity: this report) identifies key drivers of inequity both inside and outside education settings for the selected demographic groups. The key drivers of inequity in education inside education settings include standardised testing, one-size-fits-all curriculum, teaching and staffing issues and absence of a whole of school approach, with a lack of adequate resources and infrastructure. Drivers outside education settings include disconnections between schools and community, poverty and lack of a supportive home environment. These drivers are the causes of difference in learning outcomes between students in vulnerable circumstances and their peers.

To achieve equitable education and to create change at both a societal and systemic level, stakeholders from education settings, communities, governments, and organisations in the for-profit and the not-for-profit sector need to unite and collaborate.

The Education Inequity Report identifies solutions in the form of levers of change, drawn from evidence-based programs and interventions for each of the five demographic groups and where outcomes implementation has been effective. Examples of identified levers include laying the foundations for accessible, affordable, and high-quality early childhood care and education; embedding community and home connections in education settings; and building an inclusive and

holistic school culture, with adaptive and flexible learning frameworks.

Part two (Levers of Change: next report) will examine these levers of change, drawing from successful and promising evidence-based initiatives and set out recommendations that act as a call for action to stakeholders.

The Education Inequity report recommends a need to redefine current testing measures and learning outcomes; build stronger evidence of alternate education models that sit outside traditional education settings and value student agency and capabilities.

Australia should strive to commit to achieving an equitable and excellent education system.
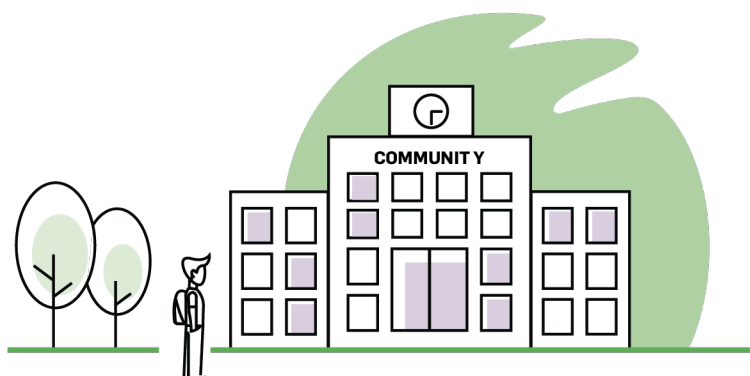
3. Introduction

Achieving greater equity in education is not only a social-justice imperative, it is also a way to use resources more efficiently, and to increase the supply of knowledge and skills that fuel economic growth and promote social cohesion. Not least, how we treat the most vulnerable students shows who we are as a society.[2]

Australia ranks in the bottom third of OECD countries in providing equitable access to quality education.[3] While Australia prides itself in being the land of the 'fair go', Australia's education system from early childhood learning to post-secondary education and beyond is far from equitable. An effective education system should support the development of every student, including their academic attainment, vocational preparation, social skills, active citizenship, emotional wellbeing and physical health.[4] However, students in Australia do not have equal opportunity for educational success, and certain groups continue to fall behind in learning outcomes. For example:[i]

>> Only 79% of Year 9 Indigenous students living in major cities are meeting national minimum reading standards in NAPLAN, compared to 92% of non-Indigenous students. The figures are worse for Indigenous students living in remote and very remote locations as compared to non-Indigenous students (32% and 54%, respectively).[5]

>> There is a widening performance gap in NAPLAN scores between students with low and high levels of parental education, and the gap widens significantly as students progress through school years.[6]

>> People with disability have lower levels of educational attainment, with 1 in 3 people aged 20 and over completing Year 12 or equivalent, as compared to 2 in 3 people without disability in the same age range.[7,ii]

>> Socio-economic gaps in achievement are large in Australia. For example, there is a 92 point gap between students who are socio-economically disadvantaged and advantaged in the mean science score in 2018 PISA results.[8,iii]

The COVID-19 crisis has perpetuated existing inequities in our education systems, with early indications showing the crisis has widened the inequity gap.[9] This is because of lower socio-economic areas having fewer resources to quickly translate learning materials to online settings, certain home environments not being conducive to learning, inequitable access to technology to take part in remote learning and inadequate staff training to switch to remote learning in disadvantaged schools.[10] Early data suggest disadvantaged students are likely to have learnt at only about 50% of their regular rate, losing approximately a month of learning over a two-month lockdown in early 2020.[10]

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[i] The report does not propose to provide a recent complete list of all indicators in the education system where inequity is visible. NAPLAN testing was not performed in 2020 due to COVID-19.

[ii] Students with disability include students with intellectual, cognitive or physical disability or neurological differences. The completion rates are even lower (1 in 4) for people aged 20 and over with moderate to severe disability.

[iii] Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the OECD.

Policy gaps and education disparities have grown in the last two decades despite multiple state and federal reviews, senate inquiries and reforms.[11–15] Some of the policy reforms may have unintentional and regressive impacts.[16] Major education reforms that have taken place in recent years include:

» an overhaul of the Australian curriculum with an increased focus on literacy and numeracy and less emphasis on general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities[17,18]

» the introduction of national literacy and numeracy testing (NAPLAN)[19]

» national reporting on schools now available via the My School website[20]

» attempts to improve teacher quality through introducing several professional standards for teachers[21]

» Resource Allocation Model (RAM) as part of the partial implementation of the Gonski needs-based funding reforms[22]

» establishment of the Joint Council as part of the Closing the Gap report.[23]

Almost every review or inquiry has highlighted the problems faced by students and the gaps in academic performance. However, education policies and practices, particularly in rich countries, have made little movement in improving the inequity gap.[3]

Equitable education is one of the main vehicles for ensuring everyone has an equal opportunity to build a secure future. By maximising each student's learning growth, they are better prepared for a complex and rapidly changing world.[23] Equity in education matters because **factors that students do not have control over should not predetermine their educational outcomes**.[24] Evidence suggests that the majority of the variation in student achievement is attributable to factors outside of school.[16,25] To promote equity and excellence in education, it is necessary to consider factors inside and outside of school and the education journey as a partnership between different members of the community.[iv]

Mainstream understandings of what constitutes 'educational success' are not well-developed, with outcomes geared to a very linear, one-dimensional, one-size-fits-all form of education.[26] As such, commonly reported education indicators and outcomes do not fully capture students' characteristics, capabilities and holistic learning experiences that occur both inside and outside school gates. Research suggests there is a plethora of other social, environmental and cultural elements that are equally important in terms of generating and underpinning a successful learner.[26] Moreover, existing indicators are not able to capture all the key objectives that are set out for achieving a comprehensive school education for students. For instance, there is no formalised measure of students' preparedness to be confident and creative or be active and informed citizens,[27] despite this being an accepted aim during schooling.

Australia needs alternate pathways from the conventional ATAR-based curriculum, a more inclusive

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[iv] Refer to Appendix 3 for Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration statement.

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and equitable model of capturing students' learning experiences inside and outside education settings, and a framework that recognises their progress in capabilities and life skills such as active citizenship and purposeful engagement. Students who are more disadvantaged must have the same access to opportunities (e.g. experienced teachers and high-quality school resources and infrastructure) and experiences (e.g. supportive family/carers and peer networks) as their more privileged peers. Opportunities and experiences need to be tailored to students' circumstances to ensure they are actively and productively engaged in schooling.[28] To achieve an equitable education system, we need to not only improve outcomes of those who routinely perform less well than their peers but also provide quality learning opportunities for all children and young people for greater and inclusive societal engagement.

A systems-thinking,[29] evidence-based approach to addressing education inequity recognises the interconnections and interrelations in problems, processes and outcomes to act in a more integrated way. It identifies the changes needed in practice and policymaking, and the agents and stakeholders who need to be brought to the forefront to create a more equitable and fair education system. Solutions are complex, and levers require genuine commitment, partnership and support from all sector levels, including government, communities, non-profits, families and education providers. Rather than following a 'what works' agenda, we must ensure that equity in education follows a more complex, nuanced 'what might work for whom, in what context and under what circumstances' agenda, if we are to achieve equitable outcomes as a nation.

4. The Education Inequity Report

The Amplify Insights: Education Inequity Report highlights where more needs to be done to create equitable opportunities and positive learning experiences for each child to thrive within and beyond the education setting gates. The report takes a systems approach to propose collaborative solutions designed for individual student achievement, holistic interventions between education settings, home and communities and which brings together *all* stakeholders working to improve education outcomes.

This report is concerned with three interlinked questions:

1. What are the key drivers of inequity in education?

2. What are the effects of inequitable learning opportunities and experiences?

3. What can be done both inside and outside the school gates to reduce these inequities?

Part one (Drivers of Inequity: this report) will cover the first two questions and Part two (Levers of Change: next report) will cover the third question.[v]

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[v] Refer to Appendix 1 for details of steps involved in report preparation.

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Three overarching principles guided the report:

An inclusive strengths-based holistic model

This report recognises the importance of countering 'deficit' or 'exclusionary' discourses that shift responsibility from governments and corporations to individuals and stigmatises certain demographic groups or classify the communities they live in as 'at risk'. Instead, a strengths-based inclusive approach is adopted to identify what drives education inequity and what can be done, so every child and young person is given the right opportunities and experiences to thrive.

This recognition extends to understanding the limitations of standard indicators of success in learning in schools, such as NAPLAN, and the prevalence of the use of deficit narratives in policy discourse and data when referring to certain demographic groups. Young people's learning experiences are influenced by a variety of extrinsic and intrinsic factors outside of school, such as family and cultural backgrounds, learnings within families and communities, kinds of settlement experiences met after arriving from war-torn countries and the places and communities they live in.[30]

While recognising these limitations, the Education Inequity Report accepts the use of common references such as standardised testing, common education settings, or indicators of successes, in the framing of the report. The report further acknowledges that evidence review processes, including identifying criteria of what counts as success in learning, were also inevitably undertaken from a Western perspective.

A systems-thinking model

Many agents both within and outside the education system (including families and caregivers) affect student learning outcomes as they enter and exit key milestones in formal education settings. For this reason, a systems approach, focused on understanding the interrelationships, interactions, constraints and enablers,[29] is utilised to map the agents and stakeholders across the education and community system that support children and young people in their learning and development. It is only through understanding the connection and shared responsibility between different players in the system that it is possible to determine the type of solutions needed to address education inequity.

An evidence-based model

The report highlights examples of successful initiatives implemented across the different cohorts and equity groups, which have acted as key levers of change for the drivers of inequity. Identifying drivers and levers of change involved conducting a comprehensive evidence review[vi] to identify which programs, practices and interventions in schools and communities have been most successful in improving education outcomes for children and young people. Final report recommendations and calls for action are discussed based on the evidence review and outlined levers of change.

[vi] Refer to Appendix 2 for evidence review process.

Demographic overview

Evidence shows there are specific , often overlapping, demographic groups who consistently bear the brunt of education inequity,[vii] perpetuated by interconnected and often discriminatory social forces, such as race, class and gender.[31] They include students:

» from a low socio-economic or socio-educational household

» from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background

» with a disability

» who are refugees or migrants from a non-English speaking background

» who live in a rural, regional or remote area.

Belonging to a particular demographic group does not in itself equate to poor academic performance, nor is it a barrier to achieving successful educational outcomes. Rather, a range of societal and system factors can create structures that hinder the potential and growth of each student, independent of their capability or circumstances. For those left behind, the achievement gap widens through the early, middle and senior years of schooling. Low achievers in Year 3 are two years and eight months behind high achievers, a gap which grows to three years and eight months by Year 9.[6]

> By Year 9, low-achieving students are more than three years behind high-achieving students in academic performance.

While postcodes should not determine destiny, postcodes, family background, and parent income levels are persistent determinants of student performance.[1,32] The recent pandemic has further negatively impacted children and young people already facing severe social and educational exclusion. This includes students facing severe disadvantage such as households where there is domestic violence, drug misuse, neglect or involvement with youth justice, or who are homeless, living in poverty or belong to certain demographic groups.[9] There are an estimated 800,000 children and young people in these groups in Australia who have been educationally disadvantaged due to learning at home in the COVID-19 context.[9]

All too often, developmental and educational outcomes follow *social gradients*: the more disadvantaged one's circumstances, the worse one's long term education, health and wellbeing outcomes are likely to be.[33] Widening disparities compromise future education, employment and opportunities.[34,35] Gaps between rich and poor also cause low social mobility across the different dimensions of earnings, education, occupation and health.[36]

Key issues facing the demographic groups are outlined below. Some of these challenges may overlap when various drivers of inequity are discussed in the next section.[viii]

[vii] The groups mentioned below are not mutually exclusive, with some students falling into more than one category and therefore experiencing greater risk of poor outcomes.

[viii] References for demographic groups are drawn from literature and rest are from the reports provided by expert contributors.

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Students from low socio-economic or socio-educational households

Socio-economic factors are one of the strongest drivers of educational inequity.[37,38,ix] Students from high socio-economic backgrounds (for example, students living in families with more wealth, attending well-resourced schools) are twice as likely to have a strong 'growth mindset', a key predictor of learning and performance, compared to students from low socio-economic backgrounds.[23] Socio-educational backgrounds are derived from factors to do with parental education.[x] Both socio-economic factors and socio-educational backgrounds contribute to disadvantaging students from achieving their academic potential.[27]

Recognising that the problem of education inequity does not lie with students nor their communities, it is important to understand the surrounding barriers that contribute to poor academic achievement in students. For instance, socio-economic factors are a barrier to Aboriginal/or and Torres Strait Islander students' achievement only when combined with other societal factors such as regressive policies, social challenges in communities or the lack of culturally appropriate resources to suit student needs. Key challenges that perpetuate inequity include:

» Parental and home factors (for example, parental education and availability of material and economic wealth)

» School and neighbourhood location/jurisdictions (for example, availability of social and cultural capital, and access to learning resources)

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students account for 7.3% of government school students and 2.7% of non-government school students, and they fare considerably worse in education outcomes than non-Indigenous students.[27] Using conventional learning and assessment outcomes, students have lower attendance, retention and achievement across all age groups and in all states and territories. Beyond education outcomes, there are generally lower labour force participation and employment rates, lower general socio-economic status and health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.[4] Students living in regional and remote areas fare far worse in all outcomes than those in urban locations. A central tension exists where the goals and purposes of education and what constitutes knowledge and success in learning in Indigenous cultures are different to Western concepts of knowledge. Western education and curriculum including standardised testing and metrics are based on a model inherently developed on non-Indigenous terms, which fails to recognise Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander knowledge and ways of learning of First Nations people.[39]

[ix] Socio-economic status is calculated the basis of postcode of students' home addresses, based on the ABS Postal Area Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage.

[x] The ICSEA is a student level score constructed by ACARA from information obtained from school enrolment records. relating to parents' occupation, school education and non-school education.

Key challenges that perpetuate inequity in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders education include:

» Deficit theorising around Indigenous students, families, communities, cultures and history impacting educational policy, pedagogy and professional learning

» Structural and systemic racism and racist practices in schools resulting in a loss of culture, language, community and kinship structures

» A lack of adequate and sustainable resources to overcome social challenges, based on varied community contexts, whether in remote or urban locations[40,41]

The issues impacting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders education are complex, and this report cannot cover every aspect. However, aligned with the premise that access to education is a basic human right, this report seeks to illuminate the importance of drawing upon the strengths and skills of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and their communities that help to enrich learning for every child in Australia.

Students with disability

Children and young people with disability[xi] face several barriers, both inside and outside school gates. Inconsistency and lack of understanding between different key stakeholders, lack of coordination between various departments and service sectors, and the complexity in implementing changes means it is challenging for students to access good quality education in appropriate settings.[42] Conceptualising disability as socially situated, existing in relation to boundaries constructed by social beliefs and policy practices is important. This enables to recognise and identify the adjustments required as adjustments to society and the environment, as opposed to the individual.[43]

Inclusive, high-quality and responsive learning support that is suited to child's needs includes, but is not limited to:

» specialised technology or equipment

» building modifications

» content and curriculum adaptation and its delivery.

These forms of support are often either inadequate or not available because of limited financial and human resources, or poor collaboration and communication between stakeholders.[44]

Equitable access to education for students with a disability is hard to achieve in a 'standardised testing climate', where schools are often competing with each other to maintain or improve their academic standards. For this reason, there are very few children with a disability who attend

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[xi] Students with disability include students with intellectual, cognitive or physical disability or neurological differences.

independent schools. There is also the tendency to cluster 'similarly disabled' students in certain schools and other educational institutions, creating environments where students with and without a disability are not able to learn together. The current COVID-19 crisis has placed additional challenges on students with disability and their parents/carers.[45] Students who were not able to attend school missed out on vital learning and human support necessary for their developmental progress. Parents and carers, particularly those who look after children with severe physical and cognitive disabilities, were not able to have much-needed respite from caring responsibilities.[9] The NDIS funding model complexities exacerbate the challenges faced by young people and their carers in accessing mainstream services such as education.[46]

Key challenges that perpetuate inequity for students with disability are:

» Discrimination and exclusionary practices, either conscious or unconscious, at various levels in school and educational settings

» Lack of willingness by school staff and/or lack of resources (accentuated by external pressures) to adapt curriculum and create inclusive settings and teaching environments

» Lack of understanding/knowledge by staff and leadership on individual student capacities and backgrounds and positive gains and impact to all students

It is worth noting that data are largely uncollected for students with a disability. This absence of data means that we do not know enough about how students in these groups are faring compared to the national average and as a result, their experiences have been largely invisible in policymaking and practice.

Migrants and refugee students with a non-English-speaking background

This report purposefully focuses on students from humanitarian migrant and refugee backgrounds as opposed to the larger cohort of culturally and linguistically diverse immigrant students, whose educational outcomes are generally equal or better than the national average.[47] Similar to students with disability, there are limited data on the educational outcomes of migrant and refugee students. While immigrant communities are generally welcome and have made significant contributions to Australia's economic and social wellbeing, families who are humanitarian migrants and refugees have very different settlement experiences and limited opportunity structures to participate fully in society.[48] Many of these students arrive in Australian education settings and schools from war-torn countries, where attendance is either interrupted or not possible.[49] Students may be affected by psychological trauma, have experienced personal loss and generally arrive with a limited knowledge of English.[49] A lack of understanding of these issues by schools means that educational gaps in literacy and language during transitional periods emerge, which results in issues that exaggerate vulnerabilities.[50] For this group, the current COVID-19 crisis has hindered their learning progress and English language literacy due to reduced support from families (which was always difficult) or communities.[9]

Schooling, instead of promoting successful settlement outcomes, social inclusion and home language, can provoke the opposite effects, namely isolation and exclusion.[51] Key challenges that perpetuate inequity are:

» Experiencing new barriers and insecurities in schools due to structural and systemic racism and racist practices.

» Acculturative stress due to deficit framing and underlying assumptions about western notions of schooling that overlook the strengths and cultural capital of learners.

» Challenges emerging at the nexus of multiple and often competing institutions and agendas – in this case, settlement services, health, education, society, community and sociocultural values.

» Limited teacher awareness of multicultural education and policies, complexity of teaching context associated with cultural and linguistic knowledge, limited support, for instance, for collaboration with communities and families.

Students living in regional and remote locations

Entrenched poverty and disadvantage is geographically concentrated, and people in these communities lacking basic security and cohesion that are present in more affluent households.[28] Geographic disadvantage strongly impacts on children's ability to succeed in school.[52] Geographically remote and very remote students account for 2.4% of government school students and 1.0% of non-government school students,[27] yet there is a sizeable 'remoteness gap' in student outcomes in Australia. Key challenges that perpetuate inequity are:

» In addition to differences in socio-economic status, outer rural, remote and regional communities tend to have higher proportions of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and lower proportions of students from a language background other than English (LBOTE), which can intersect and compound the impacts of inequity.

» Low rates of attendance, low teacher retention, lower rates of high-quality teachers, particularly relevant to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and experiences, and lack of sustained high-quality access to internet all act as significant barriers to student progress.[53]

» There is a huge gulf in access to internet resources to support student learning between remote and metropolitan areas. Around 44.5% of families almost entirely living in very remote areas of Australia, and who are the lowest ranked in areas of developmental vulnerability and educational participation, have no internet access, as compared to virtually all families living in the most advantaged areas.[47]

» Families in regional and remote communities experience other disadvantages such as lower levels of access to high-quality educational settings, care and health services and other wrap-around facilities than those living in major cities and urban areas, creating further obstacles to high-quality learning and improved education outcomes.[47]

Students from remote areas perform less well in basic literacy and numeracy competencies, have fewer subject options at school, and have more limited career opportunities than those who live in metropolitan areas. A child born in remote Australia is only a third as likely to go to university as a child born in a major city.[47] Remote regions spanning the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia have the highest level of educational disadvantage and are among the lowest ranked in developmental vulnerability and educational participation.[47] At the same time, deficit construction that adopts inefficient ways of comparisons between urban and rural students' education attainment without recognising rural knowledge is not helpful in addressing inequity issues.

Cohort overview

Acknowledging the nature and settings of learning and development that occurs across stages, this report has framed the early, middle and senior years to cover:

- » Early years: to end of primary school (Year 6)
- » Middle years: start of secondary school (Year 7) to end of compulsory schooling (Year 10)
- » Senior years: Year 11 to end of schooling (Year 12) to early adulthood (20 to 24 years)

These are important phases of transition from early years through to senior school, and identifying and addressing issues of inequity during these times is crucial to ensure success in learning and education for every child. The report has attempted to focus on these critical transitionary phases to effect and catalyse change.[xii]

[xii] Refer to Appendix 3 for definitions of cohorts from the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration and key points with respect to the three cohorts. References for cohort years are drawn from literature as well as from the reports provided by expert contributors.

5. Are we measuring the outcomes that matter?

The vision and objectives of Australia's school education system are stated in the Productivity Commission's *Report on Government Services*[27] (see Box 1).

<u>Box 1. Objectives for school education</u>

Australian schooling aims for all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens positioning them to live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives. It aims for students to excel by international standards, while reducing educational disadvantage.

To meet this vision, the school education system aims to:

>> engage all students and promote student participation

>> deliver high-quality teaching with a world-class curriculum.

Governments aim for school education services to meet these objectives in an equitable and efficient manner.

Source: Australian Government, Productivity Commission (2020)

These objectives serve as a guiding tenet, while the indicators listed below are used to determine whether and how much learning progress is being made by Australian students.

Indicators of success in learning in the early years:

>> Preschool enrolment in the year before full-time schooling

>> Enrolled in 15+ hours of preschool per week in the year before full-time schooling

>> Children developmentally on track at point of entry to school (Australian Early Development Census)

Indicators of success in learning in the middle years:

>> Engagement in school measured by student attendance and retention rates (Years 1 to 6 and 7 to 10)

>> PISA Sense of belonging at School Index

>> NAPLAN reading and numeracy: proportion of Year 7 students who achieved at or above the national minimum standard

>> NAPLAN civics and citizenship: proportion of Year 10 students at or above proficient standard

Indicators of success in learning in the senior years:

>> Retention rates from Years 10 to 12

>> Completion of Year 12 or equivalent qualification at age 19

>> Proportion of 20- to 24-year-olds fully engaged in work and/or study

» Student participation in university compared to their representation in the community

While these indicators are useful to assess equity and differences in students' opportunities, experiences and outcomes, there are serious limitations to collapsing 'success' down to academic performance, attendance and completion of Year 12.[xiii] Problems include:

» Academic performance and school attendance are not holistic measures for defining successful outcomes in schooling.

» The measures do not fully capture the holistic learning experience that occurs both inside and outside education settings.[26]

» Outcomes are geared to a very linear and one-dimensional form of education, when research suggests that there is a plethora of other social and cultural elements that are equally important in terms of generating and underpinning a successful learner.[26]

» Furthermore, the use of deficit narratives in policy discourse and data, and when referring to education outcomes, stigmatises students in vulnerable contexts and increases barriers to achieving education equity. This language is reflected in statistics that on the surface seem unambiguous in their demonstration, for example, of poor outcomes for remote Aboriginal/or and Torres Strait Islander students (NAPLAN achievement data, school attendance data, Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data and the Closing the Gap report).

Only improving on the above indicators will not achieve the outcomes to broaden access, raise levels of achievement, or ensure students' attendance and engaged learning.[47]

What counts for success in learning?

In advocating for a more inclusive education system, it is essential to recognise that success in learning should not be solely tied to high academic performance based on skills related to literacy and numeracy. For groups of children and young people, learning can be heavily influenced by extrinsic and intrinsic factors outside of school. Influencing factors could be family and cultural backgrounds, skills learnt in families and communities, settlement experiences after arriving from war-torn countries, which part of the country they live in, and how their learning is informed by cognitive or physical disability.[30,43] Advancing our education system will require us all to advocate for alternative definitions and measures of student success in learning that are fair, holistic and inclusive. These include:

» Capturing inside and outside school learning experiences. For example, it is important to understand and take into account the learning context for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, which varies considerably from one region to another, and from the remote to the metropolitan. Understanding sociocultural and historical contexts and the

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[xiii] Success has become defined over the last 10 years through national assessment regimes and performance indicators. These performance statistics ensure that many demographic groups continue to be measured against a concept of success in education which, in every way confirms that they can only succeed (and fail) on 'conventional' terms.

role of country languages and diverse dialects is important. The learnings associated with these settings are not currently being measured (or indicators of measurement do not exist), however, this does not de-value the strength and purpose of these settings.

» Capturing a range of capabilities. Curriculum, teaching, testing and post-school options should recognise a range of capabilities including 'life skills, enterprise skills, digital literacy, technical skills, critical and analytical skills, resilience, active citizenship, emotional intelligence and self-awareness',26 all of which are critical to future pathways to thrive as active citizens and members of the community.

» Evidencing student knowledge and experiences. It is important to ensure student knowledge and progress across 'outside school' domains, reflecting their own strengths, community engagement, external contributions and experiences, personal histories, aspirations and interests is appropriately collected and evidenced as part of learning outcomes.

» Student ownership. Students should be empowered to be agents of their own learning. Just as schools have a responsibility to address literacy and numeracy, they also have a key, shared responsibility to facilitate positive programs, collaborations and learning experiences which provide autonomy and agency to students to be partners in their own learning and to drive resilience in students, their families and their communities.

Why does education equity matter?

By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. 54

Educational equity is ensuring all children and young people are given an equal opportunity to high-quality education allowing them to reach their full potential, so they feel valued and lead fulfilling and productive lives.

Australia ranks in the bottom third of OECD countries in providing equitable access to quality education.

Issues of equity do not lie with students, but around systems and structures, resulting in some groups and individuals benefitting more than others. Equity means removing barriers and overcoming background factors as the key determinant of disparity in student outcomes across Australia.[55] Because children learn in every environment, whether it be home, school or community, the quality of these settings are important determinants for their success in education.

Every child has the right to access quality education,[56] as well as to be properly cared for in a safe environment , and to be able to access adequate support from community services when needed.[57]

Education is a major contributor to the inheritance of economic advantages across generations, and is the most accessible policy instrument available to increase intergenerational income mobility.[58]

Improving education outcomes is a game changer when it comes to reducing income inequality and enabling higher incomes and attainment.[59]

These economic benefits translate to a national level. Individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to be employed, commit more hours to the labour force and have higher productivity than individuals with lower levels of education.[60] As education boosts incomes, it increases tax payments and reduces reliance on government health, welfare, and other social support programs.

Growing educational inequality cost Australia around $20.3 billion, equivalent to 1.2% of GDP from 2009 to 2015.

It has been estimated that the growing educational inequality has cost Australia around $20.3 billion, equivalent to 1.2% of GDP.[61] On the flipside, the Gonski Institute for Education found that redressing the education gap, in the case of rural students, for instance, could add $56 billion to Australia's GDP.[62]

High levels of education have a direct impact on individuals' success in life, health, wellbeing and social mobility.[63] Access to education is associated with better general health and wellbeing, less criminal activity, more effective household management and care of children's health and education.[64] These private gains to individuals and households also produce wider social benefits.[64] For instance, people with higher levels of education are generally more tolerant of people different from themselves.[63] Civic participation is also strongly correlated with education, as is interest in social and political issues. Internationally, there is evidence that greater equality in education leads to greater social cohesion.[47,65]

In the wake of COVID-19 recovery, education equity will help futureproof all students for a changing and more complex world to enable them to be better prepared for future unforeseen events.

Equity is one of the top three issues identified by young Australians as important to address in Australia today.

Overall, equity in education matters because it improves the quality of life of individuals, support social mobility, reduce public costs to society and importantly, because Australian public[66] and young people themselves recognise equity as an important tenet to the Australia they desire to live, learn and succeed in.

Summary of key points

1. While Australia prides itself in being the land of the 'fair go', Australia's education system from early childhood learning to post-secondary education and beyond is far from equitable.

2. Education inequity is not just about whether a student is in the classroom; it is closely connected with other societal issues and circumstances over which students have no control.

3. Certain groups of students consistently face barriers and educational disadvantage, for no other reasons than family background, demographic characteristics and geographic location.

4. Existing testing measures do not capture holistic learning experiences that occur both inside and outside education settings. They also do not capture all the key objectives as set out in the school education system, to do with promoting active citizenship and societal engagement.

5. Equity means valuing every child or student equally so that they are given the same education opportunities and learning experiences, regardless of their background, resources, networks, access to facilities, gender, ethnicity and so on.

6. To ensure equity, students may require different levels and types of support, depending on their needs.

6. How does inequity in education manifest?

There are three dimensions of educational disadvantage that define where the inequity gap becomes apparent.[67] Inequity manifests in each of these dimensions.

» **Opportunities**: the socio-economic status of schools, quality of teachers, as well as resources, facilities and support available in schools, at home and in the community

» **Experiences**: students' experiences at home and at school, including their relationships and interactions with their parents/caregivers, teachers and fellow students

» **Outcomes**: the values, skills, competencies, and qualifications student gain through learning, both in academic and non-academic terms (e.g. self-confidence, leadership skills etc.)

Differences in educational outcomes between individual students are natural, as individuals have different abilities, motivations, interests and aspirations and come from different backgrounds. Problems arise when learning opportunities and their associated outcomes are not appropriate for particular demographic groups. All of these hinder individual growth and development.[38,28]

The key drivers of inequity create unequal learning outcomes between students in vulnerable circumstances and their peers. These drivers cause certain groups to experience inequity in opportunities and in learning experiences that are usually provided to the most advantaged students. This report recognises that drivers of inequity have varying degrees of influence on outcomes and are situated both inside and outside education settings.

Key drivers are informed on the premise that education inequity is not a siloed issue but also connects with other important societal issues. Identified drivers align with the levers of change which is the focus of Part two of the report. All the drivers both inside and outside education settings that have been identified below are key to understanding the education inequity issue.

Table1: Summary of drivers outside and inside education settings

KEY DRIVERS OUTSIDE EDUCATION SETTINGS	KEY DRIVERS INSIDE EDUCATION SETTINGS
1. Poverty, resources and home environment	6. Standardised testing
2. Lack of accessible, responsive and affordable early childhood education and care	7. One-size-fits-all curriculum
3. Disconnection between education settings, home, and community	8. Teaching and staffing issues
4. Systems and structures – segregation and funding models	9. Bullying, discrimination and social isolation
5. Parent and family engagement	10. Absence of a whole of school approach underpinned by resources and infrastructure
	11. Absence of student voice and agency

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Key inequity drivers outside education settings

1. Poverty, resources and home environment

Thirteen percent of Australia's population live below the poverty line, with one in six children living in poverty.[68] Poverty is greatest in single parent families, the unemployed, and those who do not own their own homes.[68] One in 10 (11%) households with children aged 0 to 14 years were jobless households and more than one-fifth were experiencing some form of housing stress.[69]

For those living in the most challenging circumstances, meeting basic and familial needs such as housing, food, health and safety can become more salient and more stressful priorities than the education of their children.[70,71] Poverty adds to parental stress and hence compromises care-giving, reduces the quality and regular availability of nutrition provided, limits the capacity of families to provide their children with adequate learning opportunities, and exposes children to sustained levels of stress.[72,73]

Poverty has both direct and indirect long-lasting effects on children and students' development:

» The most disadvantaged children can have as much as seven times the risk of poorer developmental outcomes compared with those who are most advantaged.[34]

» Children in jobless households are more likely to experience a greater number of deprivations than other children.[73] Long exposure to family joblessness combined with missing out on learning is associated with poorer cognitive, emotional and physical development outcomes for children.[74,75] In struggling families, older students may experience additional responsibilities associated with caring for siblings or even parents.[73]

» The negative impacts of ongoing joblessness in families can influence children's' ability to learn the skills required to find and retain jobs and they may have diminished desire to succeed in education and employment.[76] Children in jobless families are significantly more likely to be living in deprivation across multiple health and wellbeing indicators.[73]

» For students in households who face housing insecurity or do not have safe, secure housing, it affects their home learning, school participation and performance and contributes to social and emotional behavioural problems.

The challenges have been further exacerbated through and beyond COVID-19 as a result of low JobKeeper support, removal of social benefits beyond the pandemic, employment stress, housing stress, and school closures severely affecting children from lower socio-economic quartiles, who are subjected to both social and economic stress.[9]

A supportive home environment is one that meets children and young people's basic needs and material resources and supports their wellbeing.[77] The financial cost of educating a child (for example, books, uniform, lunch and other school essentials) for someone living under or on the poverty line can be tight and sometimes overwhelming.[69] The COVID-19 situation has also pushed

households into crisis as families struggle to provide material and other learning resources at home that would otherwise have been available through school.[9] Digital exclusion is a significant driver of inequity for families and students experiencing lack of access to affordable learning devices for learning and/or without good quality consistent internet connectivity. About 1.3 million households are not connected to the internet, and one in 10 households do not have a smartphone. The cost of services hits these vulnerable groups hardest, impacting their capacity to learn and achieve outcomes.[78] A well-resourced home environment means that:

» Students in higher socio-economic households have more access to quality books or online learning material, access to technology and quality internet access, tutoring privileges and other forms of homework support and opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities.

» Cultural capital, as measured by number of books in the home, then becomes an important indicator of inequity – the 2019 TIMSS Year 4 Mathematics and science performance results showed that students scored significantly higher when they had access to books in the home.[79]

The ability to engage in learning relies on having a safe and caring home environment.

» Groups of children whose rights are not adequately protected, which impacts negatively on their wellbeing and ability to thrive.[9] Examples are where there is family violence, substance abuse, poor health, conflicting relationships, housing or unemployment stress. Living in poverty compounded by family disruptions such as substance abuse or family domestic violence can profoundly impact the quality of adult-child engagements.[73]

» For students living in vulnerable contexts, the shift to home learning during the COVID-19 crisis resulted in additional struggles such as increased risk to their safety in abusive households, overcrowded homes leading to lack of study spaces and less access to teacher and peer support networks that would otherwise have been available without the disruption to school.[9] These circumstances can disadvantage young people even if they are able and ambitious but lack adequate sources of wellbeing support.[80]

A healthy home environment constitutes: (1) adequate and appropriate learning surroundings combined with other supportive tools; and (2) a safe and caring household that meets the material, social and emotional needs of children and young people.

2. Lack of accessible, responsive and affordable early childhood education and care

Children who participate in high-quality early childhood education are more likely to complete Year 12 and less likely to repeat grades or require additional support.[81] Despite this, Australia does not yet provide all Australian children with high-quality affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC).

There is less availability of high-quality care in low SES areas than in more advantaged

neighbourhoods.[82] Children who miss out on high-quality ECEC are therefore unlikely to start school on the same foot as children who have had access to higher quality services. COVID-19 may have resulted in learning loss across domains, particularly for those living in vulnerable situations because of new challenges being faced by families. Reconnecting and re-engaging with early learning education is especially critical for these children who are generally less likely to attend early education settings such as preschool.[9]

Factors which influence the lack of accessible, responsive and affordable ECEC services for certain households include:

» Low-quality or under-resourced childcare services may not have the capacity to identify developmentally vulnerable children and be able to work with other agencies such as health and welfare services to provide support and improve school readiness.

» ECEC services in some areas are inadequately equipped to be responsive to diverse communities and meet parent and child needs.[82]

» Looming shortage and retention of well-qualified early childhood educators, with the Australian Government predicting a need for an additional 5,800 teachers per year until 2023.[83]

» Barriers to the cost of early learning, stopping families from using ECEC services or limiting them to fewer hours than they would like.[84] In 2018, low-income families were spending nearly twice the proportion of their weekly income on ECEC as high-income families.[27]

» There is a shortage of well-trained medical, welfare and other staff to help work in partnership with families and schools. Without appropriate supports, developmentally vulnerable children face the greatest risk of falling behind while transitioning to school.[23,85]

Early childhood education disparities further widen the education gaps in later years and may compromise future education, employment and opportunities. Making a successful transition from preschool and other early childhood education settings to school can make an important contribution to ensuring that the positive impacts of early learning and care will carry into primary school and beyond.[86,87]

3. Disconnection between education settings, home and community

Community plays an integral role in students' learning, supplementing what is learnt in education settings and at home. This means that there needs to exist strong two-way partnership between education settings, parents/caregivers, educators, and the community at large to achieve successful and equitable educational outcomes. This is especially important for students who are disadvantaged, either due to their home circumstances or not attending a well-resourced education setting. There are groups of students who miss out on accessing good quality academic and other forms of kinship and well-being support through community services and local networks. Local communities and families find it difficult to proactively engage in education settings to be able to feel

a sense of belonging or 'owned-ness' over schools and their curriculum, policies and teaching methods.[39] There is less evidence of genuine and innovative collaboration between educational agencies and the wider community at large to support students' learning needs and post-school aspirations.

4. Systems and structures: segregation and funding models

The proportion of students who go to a socially mixed or average-achieving school is much lower in Australia than in other comparable countries in the OECD. Australia has a highly segregated and socially stratified school system, with wealthy students clustered within certain schools (mainly Independent and some Catholic schools) and less privileged students clustered in other schools (mainly government and disadvantaged schools). Structural inequities across all schooling sectors appears to be increasing.[16] The current school funding model is inequitable, not targeted to areas most in need, and appears to be at odds with agreed educational priorities and long-term needs.[16] Effects include:

» Schools and local communities being detached from one another[1]

» Independent schools focus on creating academic streams producing different experiences for students[88] or neglecting responsibilities to provide equitable access, through mechanisms such as enrolment application criteria to boost school results.[89]

» Government schools having exclusionary practices such as filling catchment quotas in ways that deselect students with disabilities or additional support needs.[89]

» Social stratification creating an unequal spread of diversity and student talent pool between schools that keeps widening, worsening the inequity problem.[16]

» Student performance and learning outcomes between different schools varying widely because of social stratification processes and funding models. More funding does not always equate to high student performance or vice versa.

This form of marketisation reproduces structural inequalities as groups of students are at serious risk of being left behind. Social stratification has no benefits for advantaged students while compounding educational barriers for students from vulnerable contexts.

5. Parent and family engagement

Adult–child engagement plays a profoundly important role in the development of young children and is an important driver to optimise future learning.[90] Parents' continuous engagement in their child's learning from early through to senior years, especially during the critical transition periods, is vital for children to reach their full potential. A clear association between family engagement, parental aspirations and a child's academic success has been well established, and there is a long history of research into the impact of parental engagement programs.[23] Parental engagement accounts for

about 40% of the income-related gaps in cognitive outcomes for children at age four.[91] These behaviours account for more of the gap between top income quintile children and bottom income quintile children than any other factor, including maternal education, family size and race.

Factors influencing parent and family engagement include:

» A lack of awareness or guidance from educators, or not having the skills to effectively engage with their child's education can prevent parents from being actively involved as partners of learning throughout their child's schooling period.[73]

» Inadequate positive parenting practices and behaviour contributing to less than positive adult-child engagements and relationships.

Key inequity drivers inside education settings

6. Standardised testing

Standardised testing conducted through national tests such as NAPLAN can perpetuate inequity, by not fully capturing the impact of engaged, authentic and connected teaching and learning practices.[92] Australian student academic performance, as measured by international tests such as PISA, has declined over the last two decades and has occurred for every socio-economic quartile and in all school sectors.[23] The pressure from standardised testing impacts the physical and mental health of students.[93]

Standardised testing can drive inequity in the following ways:

» Standardised testing does not capture or provide adequate information on all the dimensions that schooling aims to achieve,[27] nor provides real-time information on the current knowledge and skills of the individual, as well as student growth over time.[23]

» Standardised testing is discriminatory towards many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or non-English speaking students. Lower performance subsequently classifies students as marginalised or disadvantaged against a concept of success in education which confirms that they can only succeed on non-Indigenous or English-speaking terms. Curriculum and test standardisation are defined in metropolitan terms with a failure to recognise 'rural knowledges' and experience.[53]

» Standardised assessments are used by some schools as one strategy to abdicate themselves of their equitable access responsibilities, such as meeting requirements for those with special learning needs. A school's strong performance in standardised testing is at the expense of exclusionary practices with a failure to meet the diverse learning needs of all of its students.[88]

7.   <u>One-size-fits-all curriculum</u>

Curriculum choices and availability varies between schools, depending on factors such as resources, teacher specialisation, staff availability and societal priorities. Disenchantment with the content of school subjects is not uncommon among students, with a failure to capture or reflect their ' life experiences and true interests.[88] Problems include:

» Schools in low SES or regional and remote areas can have fewer subject choices in the curriculum due to short staffing and under-resourcing. Metropolitan secondary schools offer twice the number of academic subjects as rural schools.[94] Just 9% of low SES schools offer English literature, physics, chemistry and advanced mathematics compared to 100% of high SES schools.[28]

» Subjects taught in the curriculum are also not culturally responsive to supporting the learning outcomes of marginalised students and do not take alternative skills and knowledge into account.

» The importance given to testing academic skills as a measurement of success far outweighs the importance of general capability skills that are equally necessary for success in life. Most schools are incentivised to focus on teaching 'core academic' subjects (literacy and numeracy) since other capabilities such as creativity, critical thinking and active citizenship are not assessed on a regular, national basis.

» Australia's segregated education model combined with high-stakes testing perpetuates curriculum inequality among different schools.

8.   <u>Teaching and staffing issues</u>

Teachers can account for between 10% to 30% of the variance in achievement between students.[16,95] They are seen not just as educators but also nurturers, supporting students' social and emotional wellbeing, while generally contributing to the cohesive and collegial culture of schools.[96]

Teaching and staffing issues relate to:

» Teacher retention and their wellbeing are often overlooked factors in meeting student needs.[97,98]

» Persistent shortage of teachers and staff in disadvantaged schools and in rural and remote locations. Australia has the largest gap within OECD countries in teacher shortages between advantaged and disadvantaged schools, and metropolitan versus non-metropolitan schools.[99]

» Recruitment and retention in low SES schools is a challenge, and teachers are not well supported compared to teachers in well-funded schools.[23]

» A significant number of teachers (15% of English teachers and almost 20% of mathematics teachers) are currently teaching outside their area of expertise.[100] There exists a shortage of

Education Inequity

high-quality specialised teachers, not just across key subject areas, but particularly in disadvantaged and non-metropolitan schools.

» Not all teachers and school leaders are equipped with cultural knowledge or other specific skills needed to support students in vulnerable contexts or who belong to particular demographic groups.[101]

» Teacher training does not actively prepare student teachers to ensure their teaching and classroom practices are inclusive and responsive to cope with student or location diversity.[101–104] Deficit and race-based assumptions in Indigenous education still remain a fundamental challenge, highlighting issues in preparing teachers to work with and alongside Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and their communities .

» Specialised services and literacy strategies to support the needs of low literacy learners and Second Language (ESL) learners are scarce or inadequate.[105]

» Lack of recognition of teachers' roles and responsibilities and criticism directed at the teaching profession, thereby distracting attention from wider systemic and structural problems.[16]

9. Bullying, discrimination, and social isolation

Some groups of students are subjected to bullying and racism and other exclusionary practices, which affects their ability to engage, study, and stay mentally well. Compared to the average student across OECD countries, Australian students reported being bullied more frequently.[37] Students that are more likely to experience poor mental health and wellbeing include those who speak a language other than English, students with disability, students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender and students living in families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage such as experiencing homelessness.[106,107] These students frequently raise issues of bullying, discrimination and exclusion in education settings, and can become disengaged or detached from their learning. Preventing school disengagement is important as it is a predictor of school retention, academic achievement and workforce participation.[108]

10. Absence of a whole of school approach underpinned by resources and infrastructure

Adequate mechanisms in the form of structured support to ensure a whole-of school approach are either not present or not adequate or not spread across equally across schools and communities. The main issues include:

» Issues relating to increased developmental vulnerability especially during middle years.[109]

» Substantial gaps in the numbers of students accessing services when they need them.[107]

» Lack of proper services to improve early childhood interventions for students who face mental health problems *and* who attend a disadvantaged school, which widens the inequity gap.[107]

» Poorly funded schools struggle to provide adaptive and responsive support to individual students, carers and staff based on needs. Not all schools prioritise supporting the mental health and well-being of their staff.[110]

» Schools and staff do not have enough resources or support to reduce the impact of school disengagement during the middle years. Stresses due to standardised testing, particularly among middle and high school students are not able to be adequately addressed.[111]

» Not every high school student has access to holistic career education advice and future planning, increasing the incidence of declining ambitions and employment outcomes.[47]

» Classrooms, playgrounds, personal hygiene rooms, instructional materials, learning devices including technological aides and other essential equipment are not equitably spread or the same for every school to enable a functional learning environment.

OECD countries with higher-performing school systems allocate resources more equitably among socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged schools. Supporting disadvantaged schools does not necessarily mean providing them with more resources, but rather with high-quality human and material resources.[112]

For instance, the inequitable distribution of resources means that:

» Half of students in disadvantaged schools report high levels of noise and disorder in their classroom, compared to one-third of students in advantaged schools.[37]

» Children with developmental disabilities or special needs are often excluded from education settings or do not receive the same level of learning and social opportunities when they are enrolled.[113]

11. <u>Absence of student voice and agency</u>

Young people's voices are generally absent from education discussions, design and policies, both in school and non-school settings, particularly concerning decisions that are made *for* them *by* others. Systems are not in place to support students to be key drivers and agents of their learning. Students who sit outside the 'mainstream' framework face more exclusion from their voices being heard on what is effective and needed for them to be supported and engaged in their learning.

Students not being given an opportunity to be active participants in their learning and future means that:

» The voices of students with disabilities or refugee backgrounds are largely absent in schools,

student representative governments and policy consultations.

» Curriculum, testing regimes and assessment methods create barriers to inclusivity. There is no clear method by which to capture and recognise learnings and contributions that occur outside of school, either at home or in the community. The role of student civic engagement in communities is absent in discussions around educational outcomes.

» Well-funded schools with high-quality teaching staff provide more opportunities for their students' voices to be heard, and foster engagement that is confident, active and well informed, leading to more inclusive, productive and fulfilling lives.[26]

» There can be increased levels of disengagement from school, particularly during senior years.[114]

Effects of inequitable learning opportunities and experiences

Recurring systematic patterns of disengagement and poorer learning outcomes signals that our education system fails to work for certain groups of Australians.

The indicators included in the table below (Table 2: Outcomes) are commonly used to measure progress and equity in educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes. They are based on readily accessible administrative or government data. Disenfranchised students in vulnerable contexts are more likely to fare worse in participation and engagement in schooling and in achieving minimum proficiency standards in their learning compared to the national average. Data not publicly available is marked 'n/a'. Data marked in red text may not be accurate. Accurate data requires lengthy processes of retrieval and analysis for fact-checking.[xiv]

[xiv] The table contains most recent figures available. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have impacted some of the outcomes. Refer to Appendix 4 for full list of caveats and additional notes relating to table 2.

Table 2: Outcomes

Indicator		National average	Indigenous	Low SES	Regional	Remote	Disability	LBOTE
EARLY YEARS								
Preschool enrolment in the year before full-time schooling: equity ratio, 2018 [115(a)]		n/a	0.94	0.94	1.05	0.96	0.82	0.78[(b)]
Enrolled in 15+ hours of preschool per week at 4 to 5 years, of total enrolled (%), 2019[116]		**95.0**	95.4	95.0	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Children developmentally on track at point of entry to school (%), 2018 [117]		**78.3**	58.7	67.7	69.4	43.8	n/a[(c)]	74.3[(d)]
MIDDLE YEARS								
Student attendance rates from Years 1 to 6 (%), 2019 [115(e)]		**92.4**	84.5	n/a	91.7	81.0	n/a	n/a
Student attendance rates from Years 7 to 10 (%), 2019[115(e)]		**89.9**	76.5	n/a	88.1	71.9	n/a	n/a
Proportion of full-time students whose attendance level is greater than or equal to 90% from Years 1 to 6 (%), 2019 [115]	Govt	**75.3**	51.3	n/a	72.0	49.4	n/a	n/a
	Non- govt	**79.3**	57.4	n/a	76.0	52.2	n/a	n/a
Proportion of full-time students whose attendance level is greater than or equal to 90% from Years 7 to 10 (%), 2019[115]	Govt	**63.8**	35.9	n/a	58.4	37.4	n/a	n/a
	Non-govt	**74.9**	47.6	n/a	69.8	36.1	n/a	n/a
Apparent retention rates (FTE) from Year 7/8 to Year 12 (%), 2019 [118(f)]		**85.0**	59.8	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
PISA Sense of Belonging at School Index, 15-year-olds, 2018 [115(g)]		**−0.19**	−0.32	−0.32	−0.28	−0.26	n/a	n/a
NAPLAN reading: proportion of Year 7 students who achieved at or above the national minimum standard (%), 2019[119]		**94.5**	77.9	86.9[(h)]	92.8	67.7	n/a	94.2[(d)]
NAPLAN numeracy: proportion of Year 7 students who achieved at or above the national minimum standard (%), 2019[119]		**94.3**	76.0	86.4[(h)]	92.3	68.3	n/a	93.5[(d)]
NAPLAN civics and citizenship: proportion of Year 10 students at or above proficient standard (%), 2019[115]		**38**	17	22[(h)]	30	25	n/a	36[(d)]
SENIOR YEARS								
Apparent retention rates (FTE) from Year 10 to Year 12 (%), 2019[118]		**82.9**	61.0	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Completion of Year 12 or equivalent qualification at age 19 (%), 2016[120]		**74.4**	58.2	63.2	64.7	45.8	63.0	86.7[(d)]
Proportion of 20- to 24-year-olds fully engaged in work and/or study (%), 2016 [120(i)]		**63.1**	35.6	49.4	53.2	41.2	19.9	75.5[(d)]
Student participation in university: equity ratio, 2018 [121(a)]		n/a	0.65	0.47	0.77	0.44	0.82	0.40[(j)]

Summary of key points

» Inequities in education can be conceptualised through the dimensions of opportunities, experiences and outcomes.

» Drivers of inequity occur inside and outside education settings.

» Engagement in learning and gaps in education, health and wellbeing outcomes widen as children progress through the early, middle and senior years of schooling, particularly if high-quality education is not provided in the early years.

» Educational disadvantage is compounded, and inequity tends to be exacerbated when students belong to more than one equity group, seriously limiting their access to quality learning opportunities and experiences (e.g. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students living in remote locations).

» Conventional definitions and measures of success in learning (e.g. high-stakes standardised testing) are not fit for purpose for many students. Students from certain demographic groups are more likely to fare worse in participation and engagement in schooling and in achieving minimum proficiency standards in their learning compared to the national average in standardised assessments.

» Non-existent or non-accurate data for certain groups further highlight structural problems that steepen inequity.

7. What works to address drivers: activating the right levers

Education inequity is a complex issue requiring complex solutions. Education inequity is not a standalone issue and is not confined to just schools or other education settings. It is linked to other societal issues, such as poverty, and is affected by wider Australian policy in a resource-constrained context. Equity groups are also diverse within themselves. In essence, coming up with solutions to address education inequity involves examining issues and contexts both inside and outside education settings.

A systems approach helps address the root causes of the problem by looking at what dynamics emerge from the whole system, rather than its individual parts.[2] By examining the levers – programs or interventions that can be implemented against the identified drivers of inequity – it is possible to identify opportunities where issues can be addressed and propose actions for addressing gaps, where evidence is insufficient.

Table 3 below presents a summary of the main drivers of education inequity inside and outside the school gates, and the associated levers of change. The 10 drivers are listed at the top of each column, with the associated levers for each driver listed below.[xv]

Part two of the Education Inequity Report will examine in detail selected levers of change (drawn from evidence-based programs or interventions), outcomes derived from those levers, and agents who need to pull those levers to achieve outcomes.

[xv] Refer to Appendix 2 for evidence review process and Appendix 5 for explanation of Table 3.

Table 3: Key drivers of inequity and associated levers of change

	Key drivers of inequity OUTSIDE education settings					Key drivers of inequity INSIDE education settings					
	1 POVERTY, RESOURCES AND HOME ENVIRONMENT	**2** LACK OF ACCESSIBLE, RESPONSIVE AND AFFORDABLE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE (ECEC)	**3** DISCONNECTION BETWEEN EDUCATION SETTINGS, HOME, AND COMMUNITY	**4** SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES: SEGREGATION AND FUNDING MODELS*	**5** PARENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT	**6** STANDARDISED TESTING	**7** ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL CURRICULUM	**8** TEACHING AND STAFFING ISSUES	**9** BULLYING, DISCRIMINATION AND SOCIAL ISOLATION	**10** ABSENCE OF A WHOLE OF SCHOOL APPROACH UNDERPINNED BY RESOURCES AND INFRASTRUCTURE	**11** ABSENCE OF STUDENT VOICE AND AGENCY
LEVERS OF CHANGE	Facilitate access to holistic support services, both inside and outside education settings.	Set up bodies to coordinate services that appropriately meet community need in early childhood education and care.	Establish two-way partnerships giving communities a sense of 'ownership' and involvement in education settings.		Build relationships between family and education settings early and develop positive parenting skills.	Employ measurement tools that are sensitive to Indigenous cultural perspectives and ways of learning.	Provide alternative learning models and flexible options for students to re-engage with learning.	Create conditions for embedding high expectations from all teaching staff.	Engage young people more fully into school and community life through social learning programs.	Provide teachers with appropriate resources relevant to equity groups, combined with pedagogical support/training.	Provide students with skills and support to express their voice and enact leadership.
	Ensure students have access to supportive and well-resourced learning environments outside of education settings.	Utilise a trauma informed model targeting families experiencing significant stress and social disadvantage.	Provide students (and families) with learning opportunities which extend outside of education settings.		Ensure open and genuine communication between education staff, families and communities.		Adapt pedagogy to suit learners' dispositions and address learning difficulties through specific strategies and interventions.	Attract and retain high-quality educators and leaders, particularly Indigenous educators.	Implement whole school preventative measures to racism.	Incentivise students to attend school through engagement programs.	Provide opportunities for students to become peer mentors who would support other students in improving academic skills.
	Provide financial support (e.g. scholarships) to assist students to remain in education.	Employ an ecological and holistic approach to school readiness, one that accounts for the diverse roles of multiple stakeholders in the transition process.	Ensure students have access to positive role models through mentoring.		Support families in navigating the transition process from home to boarding.		Embed Indigenous perspectives, language, culture and knowledge into the curriculum and teaching practices (i.e. culturally-sustaining pedagogy).	Ensure effective leadership in education settings.	Build positive and trusting relationships between educators, staff and students.	Build a school culture that promotes good teaching, trusting relationships and pastoral care.	
		Embed Indigenous histories, cultures and languages in all aspects of ECEC services.	Engage young people through programs that focus on building cultural identity and taking pride in their identity.		Provide targeted support to ease financial burden: support for travel to education settings.		Draw on and build the expertise of local language Aboriginal educators to embed culturally responsive teaching methods.		Use targeted recruitment and training to improve staff mental health and skills to support student wellbeing.	Offer welcoming, easily navigable and inclusive classroom and school environment.	
		Improve access to early interventions and provide inclusive preschool settings.	Develop partnerships with community/university/industry focusing on successful transition from school.				Increase bilingual educators and instruction in teaching and curriculum.			Provide individualised targeted learning for students.	
							Embed trauma-informed positive education strategies and elements into curriculum.				

* No programs or interventions exist since the driver is policy focused rather than issues focused.

8. Summary recommendations

Informed by the levers of change, Part two of the report will suggest recommendations and calls for action that apply to the various equity groups and cohorts for ensuring equitable and accessible education for every child. Key elements forming the basis of recommendations will likely include:

» A need for rethinking of what currently counts as knowledge

» Evidence of frameworks and alternate education models that sit outside traditional schooling to be developed and acknowledged

» Greater recognition and validation of 'characteristics' skills needed to succeed in life and employment

» A need for collecting more evidence of all learnings and experiences that form part of students' lives

» Stronger collaboration between schools and post-school learning pathways

» Increasing impact by sharing of successful learnings and interventions across education settings

We can do much better in providing equitable, high-quality learning opportunities for all young people. Success in learning should not just be measured based on high academic performance and skills that are solely related to literacy and numeracy. We should learn to value all students' experiences and respect student voices in shaping their destiny. Australia should strive to commit to achieving an equitable and excellent education system.

9. Appendix 1

Report preparation steps

The preparation of the report has involved the following stages:

» Collecting core data and information from expert contributors

» Synthesising and framing development leading to report preparation

» Identifying and synthesising drivers of inequity from expert contributors' reports

» Review of evidence-based successful programs and interventions

» Synthesising levers of change from evidence-based programs identified in review

» Peer review and report finalisation

10. Appendix 2

Evidence review process for levers

To arrive at the levers, a comprehensive evidence review was conducted to identify which programs, practices and interventions in schools and communities have been most successful in improving education outcomes for children and young people, and those which correspond to the five demographic groups in early, middle, and senior years. A systematic, transparent, and quality assessment process informed the basis of conducting the review. To conduct this scoping review, five steps were followed to ensure the research conducted was relevant to what we were seeking to determine in the report:[122]

» Framing of research questions for review

» Identifying relevant work in various studies

» Assessing quality of studies

» Summarising evidence and synthesising findings

The review was guided by the following research questions:

1   What types of programs, practices, and interventions in schools and communities have been most successful in improving education outcomes for children and young people in vulnerable contexts?

2   What factors contribute to the success of these programs/policies/interventions?

The review included a broad scope of literature reviews, peer-reviewed academic literature, and grey literature evaluation reports from an Australian context to broadly evaluate the 'state of the field'. Studies included evaluated programs, practices, or interventions for improving student education outcomes for the five equity groups at the centre of this report. To identify the relevant work, search strategies were established that were based on concepts from research questions and

inclusion/exclusion criteria were set to refine results. A scoring system, generally used in systematic reviews in the field of education, was applied in the quality assessment process.[39] This led to extracting relevant studies from various sources, leading to a final set of 96 articles that were included for synthesis and literature analysis. These 96 articles comprised 26 empirical studies, 51 evaluations and 18 reviews published in the past 10 years (2010 to 2020). Review findings were synthesised by examining the themes presented through the literature, which then formed the basis for arriving at the list of levers of change. This was then mapped against the drivers of inequity. The process of conducting the review methodology and the steps employed for the scoping review can be found in the Appendix section of Part two of the report.

In Part two of the report, a comprehensive description of the levers of change will be outlined derived from the above evidence-based data of national programs/interventions that were shown to be successful in improving education outcomes for each of the five demographic groups and where outcomes implementation has been effective. Gaps where there is less evidence of successful programs/interventions to support some of the drivers are also identified. This means more can be done to build the evidence base to address inequity issues.

11. Appendix 3

Learning statement and cohort information

Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration on learning

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration[123(p3)] states, 'Learning is a partnership with parents, carers and others in the community, all of whom have a role to play in nurturing the love of learning needed for success at school and in life'. Alongside teachers and educators, the role of caregivers and families, community services, businesses and industry leaders cannot be understated. To promote equity and excellence in education, it is also imperative that 'Australian governments work with the education community to … ensure that young Australians of all backgrounds are supported to achieve their full educational potential'.[123(p5)]

Cohort details

The 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration[123] set out the importance of achieving certain outcomes for children and young people as they progress through the early, middle and senior years of schooling (see below).

DEFINITIONS OF THE EARLY, MIDDLE AND SENIOR YEARS FROM THE ALICE SPRINGS (MPARNTWE) DECLARATION (2019)

'The **early years** of life are a period of rapid growth and development as children form their language, social, emotional and physical skills, and undergo significant cognitive development. These years provide the foundation for learning throughout school and beyond. The key to children's earliest learning and development is the quality and depth of interaction they experience; between adult and child and between child and child. These interactions take place both within and outside formal early childhood education settings.'

'The **middle years** are an important period of individual growth and learning when a balanced set of cognitive, social and emotional skills are developed. Students are finding a sense of self and require investment in their emotional wellbeing and a voice in and influence over their learning. This is also a time when they are at the greatest risk of disengagement from learning. Through directly addressing each student's range of needs, schools must focus on enhancing motivation and engagement.'

'The **senior years** of schooling are a critical transition point for young people – emotionally, socially, and educationally. These years should provide all students with the high-quality, relevant and engaging education and support necessary to complete their secondary school education. The senior years of schooling should provide all students with high quality advice, support and experiences to make informed choices about their future and smooth the initial transition to further education, training or meaningful employment.'

Learning begins at birth. The first 1,000 days – the period from conception to the end of the second year – are particularly important.[72,124] They establish a foundation of development that will help children grow, learn and thrive. Experiences and exposures during this period have a disproportionate influence on later health and development.[125] Receiving high-quality care in early years leads to significant cognitive and emotional benefits.[90,126]

Children who participate in high-quality early childhood education are more likely to complete Year 12 and are less likely to repeat grades or require additional support. It develops key 'soft' learning skills, helps build the skills children will need for the jobs of the future, and is linked with higher levels of employment, income and financial security, improved health outcomes and reduced crime.[127] There is a consensus that making a successful transition from early childhood education settings to school can make an important contribution to ensuring that the positive impacts of early learning and care will carry into primary school and beyond.[86,87] This is because differences start to emerge early and gaps widen as children grow, so that by the time children reach school there are significant differences between children in their ability to take full advantage of the learning and social opportunities that schools provide. And schools have difficulty compensating for these differences and closing the gaps.[128]

Although strong transitions are important for everyone, they are particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.[87] The benefits of attending high-quality childcare are strongest for

children from poorer households and for children whose parents have little education.[81,90]

The start of secondary schooling is seen as an *important transitional phase from childhood,* with expansive changes that exert a potent influence on children's long-term developmental prospects. Some of the changes relate to the onset of puberty, major neurodevelopmental growth impacting behaviour, social and emotional processing, and cognition. Students become increasingly independent, risk-taking, and start to take charge of their personal identity.[109,129] Furthermore, peer relationships and other relationships take on a more significant meaning. The latter half of the middle years can also be viewed as a *significant transitionary period* with additional challenges emerging related to mental health[130] and drug and alcohol experimentation.[17] As schooling is not compulsory post completion of Year 10, it is a period when students go through education options that can include deciding whether to continue on to Year 12 or not. This represents a key period in which young people need to be provided with mentorship and socio-emotional support, as they are at the greatest risk of disengagement from schooling during these years. Overall, the *middle years are therefore an important transitional phase* from childhood, with specific social, biological, physiological, psychological and educational challenges that impact on a young person's lifelong trajectory.

As students approach senior years, they are needing to make important choices and decisions about their future, whether to re-engage in post-school education or find alternative pathways for their future. Schools play an important role in providing information about these choices to enable students successfully *transition to work or study and adult life.* Addressing inequity in the senior years is critical, as factors including academic achievement and school completion are predictors of longer-term outcomes such as engagement in further training, education or work.[131]

The following figure, depicting a life-course perspective, is a useful way to recognise evolving circumstances and understand where inequities can occur in education, so that appropriate interventions can be put in place as children move through various forms of schooling.

Figure 1: A life-course perspective on educational inequities
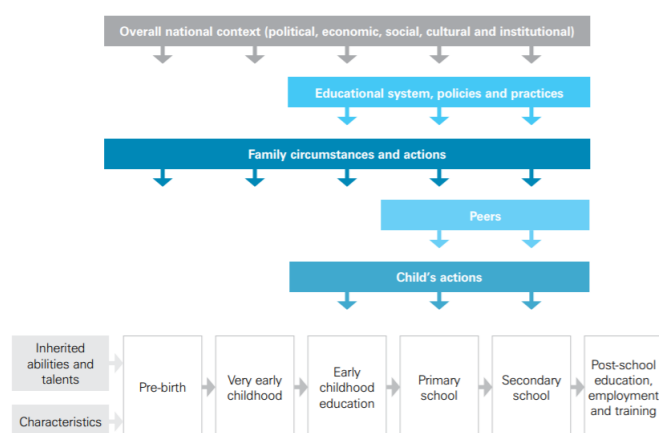
Source: UNICEF Office of Research (2018)[132]

The vision and objectives of Australia's school education system are stated in the Productivity Commission's *Report on Government Services*.[27] These are aligned with the 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration[16,123] and the National School Reform Agreement,[14] which builds on past declarations signed in Hobart, Adelaide and Melbourne[14] alongside past declarations signed in Hobart, Adelaide.[133–135] The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration promises to have young Australians at the centre, supporting them to realise their potential, as it 'sets out the vision for education in Australia and commitment to improving educational outcomes for all young Australians'.[14]

The indicators relate to educational access, participation, attainment and outcomes, and have been included in this report to assess how different demographic groups are faring compared to the national population and to what extent the stated objectives are being met for these groups.

12. Appendix 4

Caveats and notes relating to table 2

There are several caveats to Table 1, underscoring the need for caution while reading and interpreting the data in the table.

» Data not publicly available is marked 'n/a'. Some data may not be accurate and requires lengthy processes of retrieval and analysis for fact-checking. These are marked in red text.

» Data are not publicly available because they are largely uncollected for students with a disability and those from a non-English speaking background (let alone non-English speaking migrant and refugee students). This absence of data means that we do not know enough about how students in these groups are faring compared to the national average, and as a result, their experiences have been largely invisible in policymaking and practice.

» Data relating to attendance rates, especially during the middle years, are largely uncollected or are not accurate for demographic groups except for Indigenous students. While the national student attendance collection is officially reported by ACARA, the attendance rates are not disaggregated by demographic groups. Attendance rates by remoteness are not accurate and requires further analysis for fact-checking.

» Attendance rates for Indigenous students vary substantially depending on school attended, by state and by level of remoteness across Australia.

» Data relating to reading and numeracy outcomes for low SES students (based on parental occupation and parental education – see note h) and those in regional remote locations are not accurate. The correct data were not publicly available in the NAPLAN website and

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[16] In December 2018, Education Council Ministers agreed to undertake a review of the Melbourne Declaration to develop a contemporary national declaration on educational goals for all Australians, and to guide national collaborative efforts over the coming years. The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration resulted from this review.

requires lengthy processes of retrieval and analysis for fact-checking.

Table 2 Notes:

a. Equity ratio equals enrolment share divided by population share. Enrolment does not always equate to attendance. A score of one indicates equal representation of the group relative to their representation in the community. Scores below one represent unequal outcomes. It is important to note that a number of limitations exist with the underlying data used to assess the level of equity that exists between special needs groups and their access to universal preschool.

b. Data for Australia for children from NESB enrolled in a preschool program are the total of the sum of the states and territories for which data are available (excludes WA and NT), and should not be interpreted as national data.

c. Domain information about children with special needs is not included in the AEDC results because of the already identified substantial developmental needs of this group.

d. This figure represents the total number of NESB children both proficient and not proficient in English. If only accounting for students not proficient in English, data are less positive.

e. Attendance rates are the number of actual full-time equivalent student-days attended by full-time students in Years 1 to 10 as a percentage of the total number of possible student-days attended over the period.

f. Retention rate from Year 7 12 was used here, as young people are expected to participate in schooling until they complete Year 10. After the completion of Year 10, all young people are then required to participate in full-time education, training or employment or a combination, until they turn 17 years of age.

g. The Sense of Belonging Index is standardised to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 across OECD countries. Higher scores on the index are illustrative of students feeling a greater sense of belonging at school. In 2018, PISA surveyed approximately 5.5% of Australian 15-year-old students.

h. Socio-economic status can be measured in a number of ways, but a common method is through the highest educational attainment and/or occupation status of the parent/s within a family. Socio-economic status for NAPLAN scores has been calculated by combining parental education and occupation. Low SES was determined as when parents' highest educational attainment was Year 12 and parents work in unskilled manual, office and sales roles or have not been in paid work for the last 12 months. This is typically seen as a reliable measure of the level of resources a family, and consequently a child, will have.58

i. Fully engaged includes people who were employed full-time and/or in full-time study, or employed part-time combined with part-time study.

    j.   Students with a non-English speaking background in this instance are defined as domestic students who arrived in Australia less than 10 years prior to the year in which the data were collected, and who come from a home where a language other than English is spoken.

13. Appendix 5:

Explanation of table 3

   » Drivers are displayed across the page and levers are displayed down the page.

   » Levers of change occur either at micro level (home and families), meso level (schools, communities and non-profits) or macro level (policies and government), with most falling under meso level or meso in combination with other levels.

   » Some drivers have more levers of change than others. This is because there exists greater evidence of programs or interventions in these drivers, potentially highlighting the need for building a stronger evidence base across all drivers.

   » Some levers are drawn more generally from literature evidence of what works in the area, rather than from specific programs. This is because either programs or interventions do not exist, or drivers are more policy focused than issue related (e.g. standardised testing).

   » Some levers apply to all three cohorts, whereas other levers may apply only to specific cohorts, such as early years.

   » Programs from which levers are drawn may focus on one or more equity group, whereas other programs are designed specifically for one equity group (e.g. Indigenous groups).

   » A single program may have multiple outcomes/levers and thus can be applied across various drivers.

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