



# *Amplify Insights: Education Inequity*

## *Part One: Drivers of Inequity*



Presented by:



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## Suggested Citation

Varadharajan, M., Buena, P., Muir, K., Moore, T., Harris, D., Barker, B., Dakin, P., Lowe, K., Smith, C., Baker, S., Piccoli, A., 2021. Amplify Insights: Education Inequity. Centre for Social Impact, UNSW Sydney.

## Acknowledgements

The Centre for Social Impact would like to acknowledge the following organisations for their contributions to this report:

- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (Barbara Barker, Diana Harris, Penny Dakin)
- Murdoch Children's Research Institute (Tim Moore)
- UNSW School of Education (Kevin Lowe, Sally Baker)
- Melbourne Graduate School of Education (Catherine Smith)
- Gonski Institute UNSW (Adrian Piccoli)



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## 2. Executive Summary

***‘Education breaks the shackles of disadvantage and empowers those who live without privilege.’<sup>1</sup>***

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) examines these levers of change, drawn from successful and promising evidence-based initiatives and sets 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

Australia ranks in the bottom third of OECD countries in providing equitable access to quality education.<sup>2</sup> 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 schooling system should support the development of every student, including their academic attainment, vocational preparation, social skills, active citizenship, emotional wellbeing and physical health.<sup>3</sup> However<sup>i</sup>:

- » 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).<sup>4</sup>
- » 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.<sup>5</sup>
- » 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.<sup>6,ii</sup>
- » 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.<sup>7,iii</sup>

The COVID-19 crisis has contributed to widening the education inequity gap.<sup>8</sup> Nearly half of Australian children are now affected by the disruption to their education. 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.<sup>9</sup>

Policy gaps and educational disparity have grown in the last two decades despite multiple state and federal reviews, senate inquiries and reforms. 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 progress in improving the inequity gap.<sup>2</sup>

Equity in education matters because **factors that students do not have control over should not predetermine their educational outcomes.**<sup>10</sup>

Learning does not occur solely in education settings. Alongside teachers and educators, the role of

<sup>i</sup> 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.

<sup>ii</sup> 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.

<sup>iii</sup> Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the OECD.

caregivers and families, community services, businesses and industry leaders, and students themselves cannot be understated. Schooling should prepare students to be active, purposeful and informed citizens of society. To promote equity and excellence in education, it is imperative that there is shared knowledge of the drivers of educational inequity, and a commitment to prioritising what are already known to be effective levers of change.

## 4. The Education Inequity Report

The Amplify Insights: Education Inequity Report highlights current gaps where more needs to be done to create the opportunities and positive learning experiences for each child to thrive within and beyond the school gates. It is concerned with three key 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 research questions and Part Two (Levers of Change: next report) will cover the third question.

Three overarching principles guided the report:

### An inclusive strengths-based holistic model

Identify what drives education inequity and what can be done, so every child and young person is given the right opportunities and experiences to succeed.

### A systems-thinking model

Use systems approaches to map the agents and stakeholders across the education and community system that support children and young people in their learning and development.

### An evidence-based model

Identify the programs, practices and interventions in schools and communities that have been most successful in improving education outcomes for children and young people.

## Why does educational equity matter?

Educational equity is ensuring all children and young people are given an equal opportunity to access high-quality education, allowing them to reach their full potential, so they feel valued and lead fulfilling and productive lives. Equity means removing barriers and overcoming background factors as the key determinant of disparity in student outcomes across Australia.<sup>11</sup>

High levels of education have a direct impact on individuals' success in life, health, wellbeing and social mobility.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14,15</sup>

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

## How does inequity in education manifest?

There are three dimensions of educational disadvantage that contribute to inequity:<sup>16</sup>

- » **Opportunities:** the 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.)

The key drivers of inequity in education identified in the report are the causes of difference in 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.

The drivers are informed on the premise that education inequity is not a siloed issue but is connected with other important societal issues. Identified drivers align with the levers of change which is the focus of Part Two of the report.

## Demographic overview

Evidence shows there are consistent, often overlapping, demographic groups who consistently bear the brunt of education inequity. They include students:

- » from a low socio-economic or socio-educational household
- » from an Aboriginal 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 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.<sup>5</sup>

## 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)

## Are we measuring the outcomes that matter?

Indicators of success in learning as set out in the Australian schooling system, vary across the early, middle and senior years of school, and include enrolment, on-track development, a sense of belonging at school, and retention. 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. Drivers of education inequity

**Table 1: 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

### Key drivers outside education settings: policy and community level

#### 1. Poverty, resources, and home environment

Poverty has both direct and indirect effects on children's and students' development. Sustained poverty, family exposure to joblessness, and housing insecurity all have an impact on longer-term development and educational outcomes.<sup>17</sup> A healthy home environment includes adequate and appropriate learning and other resources, and a caring household that meets the material, social and emotional needs of students. Where there is family violence, substance abuse, poor health, conflicting relationships, or housing or unemployment stress, these circumstances affect creating a conducive learning environment for children and young people.

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

Australia does not yet provide all Australian children with high-quality affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC). Without high-quality care, developmentally vulnerable children may not be identified as needing extra support and low-quality or under-resourced childcare services may not have the capacity to work with other agencies such as health and welfare services to rectify the issue and improve school readiness. Low income families are particularly impacted – both by the cost of ECEC taking up nearly twice the proportion of their weekly income on ECEC as high-income families<sup>18</sup> and also by a lower average quality of care in programs compared to those in more advantaged neighbourhoods.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Disconnection between education setting, home, and community

Strong two-way partnership between education settings, parents/caregivers, educators, and the community at large is important for disadvantaged students to achieve successful and equitable educational outcomes. 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.<sup>20</sup>

### 4. Systems and structures: segregation and funding models

Australia has a highly segregated and socially stratified school system, with wealthy students clustered within certain schools (mainly private schools including some well-resourced Catholic schools) and less privileged students clustered in other schools (mainly government schools). Both government and non-government schools may employ exclusionary practices which negatively impact or hedge out students who require more support, and cause disconnection between schools and the community.<sup>21</sup>

### 5. Parent and family engagement

There is a clear association between family engagement, parental aspirations, and a child’s academic success.<sup>22</sup> Parents’ continuous engagement with 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 healthy home engagement includes good parenting practices and behaviour contributing to positive adult–child relationships.

## Key drivers inside education settings

### 6. Standardised testing

Standardised testing conducted through national tests such as NAPLAN can perpetuate inequity. Standardised testing does not capture or provide adequate information on all the dimensions that schooling aims to achieve,<sup>18</sup> and is discriminatory towards many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students or non-English speaking students. The pressure from standardised testing impacts the physical and mental health of students,<sup>23</sup> and testing cannot fully capture the impact of engaged, authentic and connected teaching and learning practices.<sup>24</sup>

### 7. One size fits all curriculum

Schools in low SES or regional and remote areas can have fewer subject choices in the curriculum due to being short-staffed and under-resourced. Metropolitan secondary schools offer twice the number of academic subjects as rural schools.<sup>25</sup> Most schools are encouraged to focus on teaching ‘core academic’ subjects (literacy and numeracy) as opposed to cultivating other capabilities such as creativity, critical thinking and active citizenship.

### 8. Teaching and staffing issues

Teachers can account for between 10% to 30% of the difference in achievement between students.<sup>21,26</sup>

They play a key role in the wellbeing, engagement and success outcomes for students who are already disadvantaged.<sup>27</sup> Teacher retention and their wellbeing are often overlooked factors when it comes to meeting student needs.<sup>28,29</sup> There is a shortage of high-quality teachers, across key subject areas, particularly in poorly resourced and non-metropolitan schools. Unfair criticism directed at teachers and the teaching profession distracts attention from wider systemic problems.<sup>21</sup> Not all teachers nor all school leaders are equipped with cultural sensitivity or other specific skills and knowledge needed to support students in vulnerable contexts or those who belong to particular demographic groups.<sup>30</sup>

#### 9. Bullying, discrimination, and social isolation

Some groups of students are subjected to bullying and racism, which affects their ability to study and stay mentally well. Structured support is either not present, not adequate or not spread across equally across schools and communities. There is inequity in access to proper services to improve early childhood interventions for students who face mental health problems, services to support or reduce the impact of school disengagement during middle years, and career advice and future planning.

#### 10. Absence of 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. Where there is an inequitable distribution of resources, children with developmental disabilities or special needs will often be excluded from education settings or do not receive the learning and social opportunities when they are enrolled.<sup>31</sup> Students in disadvantaged schools with less suitable infrastructure experience higher levels of noise and disorder in the classroom, and this interferes with concentration and engagement with learning activities. COVID-19 has heightened not just issues related to school segregation but has also impacted student learning resulting from periods without access to school resources and infrastructure.<sup>8</sup> Poorly funded schools struggle to provide adaptive and responsive support to individual students, carers and staff based on needs.

#### 11. Absence of student voice and agency

Young people's voices are generally absent from education discussions, design, and policies. 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, for example, are largely absent. Well-funded schools with high-quality teaching staff provide more opportunities for their students to be confident, active, and well informed leading to more inclusive, productive, and fulfilling lives.

## Effects of inequitable learning opportunities and experiences

Recurring systematic patterns of disengagement and poorer learning outcomes signal that our education system fails to work for certain groups of Australians. 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. Commonly used indicators that are used to measure progress in educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes disenfranchise students in vulnerable contexts and demonstrate the current weight of inequity in Australia. Non-existent data for certain groups further highlight structural problems that steepen inequity.



## 6. 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 education institutions. It is linked to other societal issues, such as poverty, and is affected by the 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.<sup>32</sup> 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 to propose actions for addressing gaps, where evidence is insufficient.

Table 2 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.

Part two of the Amplify Insights: 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. Recommendations and calls for action will also be suggested in Part two. These include rethinking what counts as knowledge, developing and acknowledging alternative education models that sit outside traditional education sectors, and gathering evidence of all learnings and experiences that form part of students' lives. Australia should strive to commit to achieving an equitable and excellent education system.

Table 2. 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.				
					LEVERS OF CHANGE					

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

## 7. 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.

Key elements of the 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





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