

Low achievement and social background: patterns,
processes and interventions

Discussion Paper

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National goals for retention underline the importance of ensuring that all young people succeed at school, at least in basic domains of learning, but also in more specific areas of the curriculum which can set them on valuable pathways to work and further study or training.

The current national level of retention (around 75%) masks very considerable differences in student achievement. Unless these differences are reduced, progress towards 90% retention or equivalent will be of dubious value and of no difference in substance compared to a recession-induced upswing.

Schools serving disadvantaged communities play a crucial role in lifting the achievement of young people who risk missing out on the benefits of extended secondary schooling or risk failing when they reach this stage or have a poor workforce transition subsequently.

So how these schools are supported is of great importance. That said, the task of redressing educational disadvantage cannot be left to these schools alone, but requires system initiatives which work in a consistent and comprehensive way to raise achievement levels.

This paper presents social patterns in educational achievement as a background to a discussion of the origins of social inequality, and then turns to how disadvantaged schools should be supported and where this fits in the wider picture.

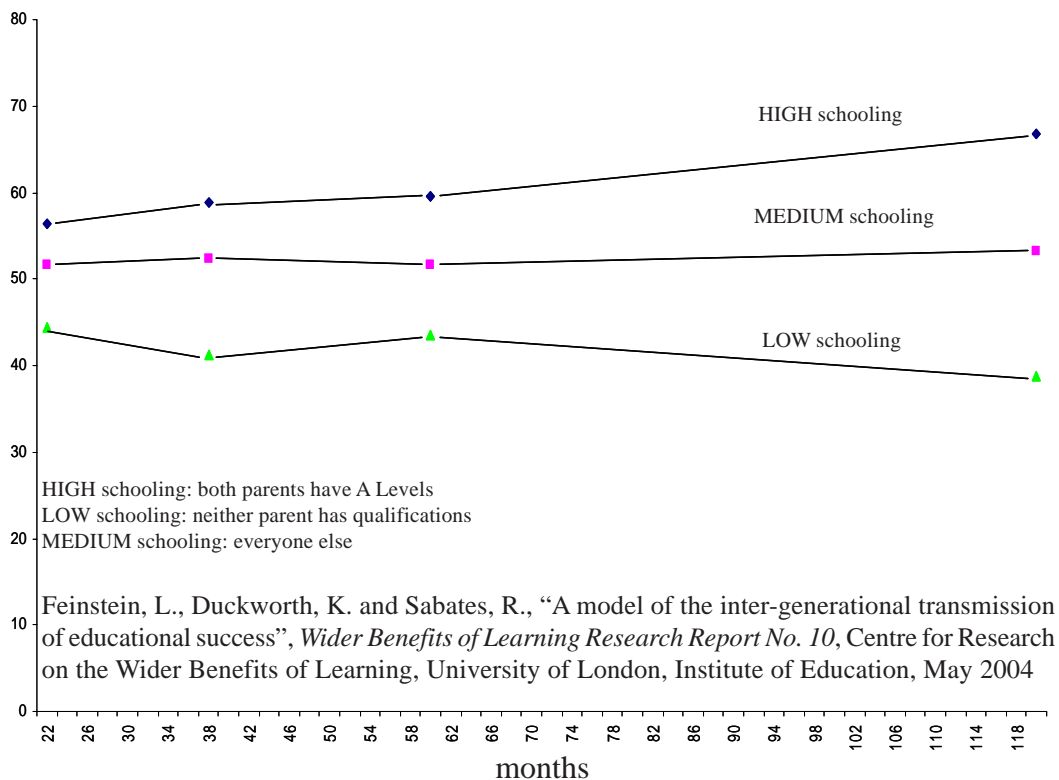
There are thus three main sections into which the Discussion Paper is divided: (1) social patterns in educational achievement: a stages of schooling perspective, (2) explaining unequal achievement, and (3) tackling disadvantage.

(1) Social patterns in educational achievement: a stages of schooling perspective.

The emergence of social differences in cognitive growth amongst children and the tendency for these differences to widen over time has been demonstrated in numerous American, British and French studies (Duru-Bellat 2007; Feinstein and Duckworth 2006; Ounce of Prevention Fund nd). Figure 1 is reproduced from Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates *et al.* (2004). This shows a social gap established by the time children begin school and also a widening of social differences over the period of primary schooling. Children, both of whose parents completed A-levels, make greater progress through school, while those whose parents did not complete secondary school tend to fall behind.

A developmental perspective on achievement draws attention to differences in how parents raise their children, including their expectations on future life-course, occupation, education, and life-style. This captures the importance of language acquisition, styles of language use, intellectual stimulus, the cultivation of dispositions

Figure 1 Growth in student learning from 22 to 120 months by level of parents' schooling



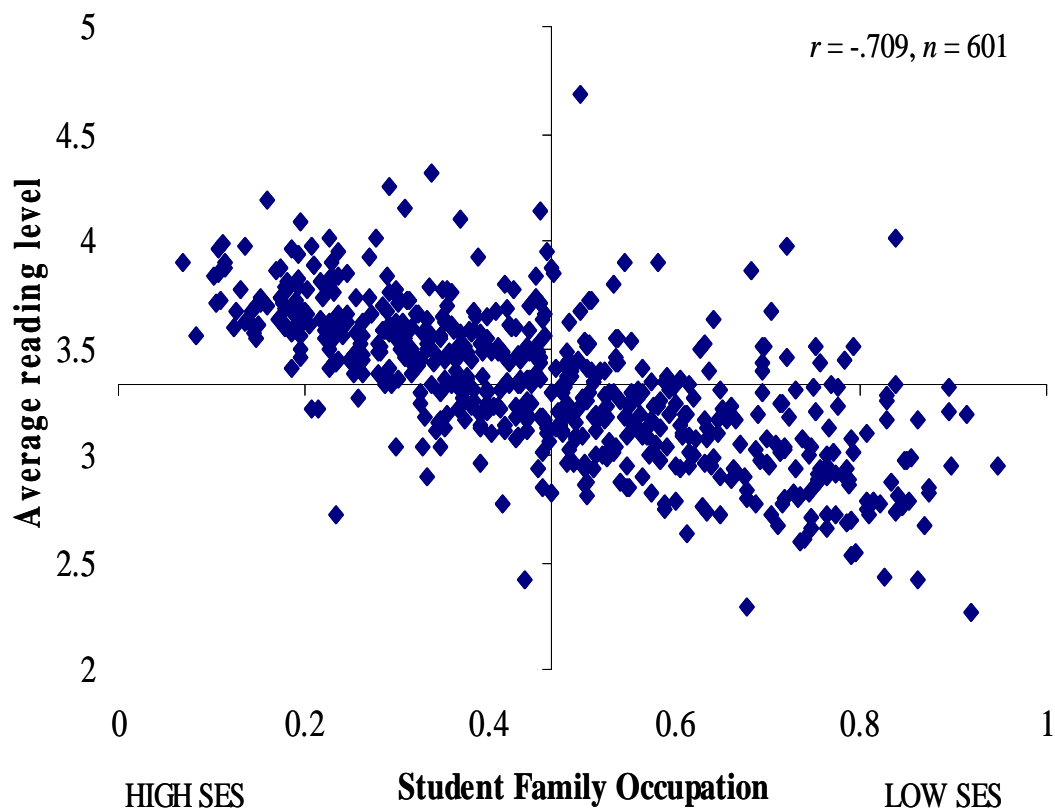
to learn and to display learning, and other aspects of socialization in families that relate closely to how children are received at school and how well they integrate in classroom and playground.

What should not be overlooked is that children exposed to social differences in family upbringing are also exposed to differences in the social mix and culture of the schools they are enrolled in. Residential differentiation acts to create more or less homogeneous settings in primary school and thus introduces a layer of interactions over and above those occurring at home. The impact of these on achievement can be seen by comparing the average achievement of children attending primary schools located in different urban settings.

Figure 2 reports reading means at Year 3 for Victorian government schools in 2002. Schools are ranked on "student family occupation" (SFO). This is based on information relating to the parents of individual children (rather than social area), and is scaled so that higher values mean high socio-economic status. There is a very strong relationship between the mean social level of a metropolitan primary school

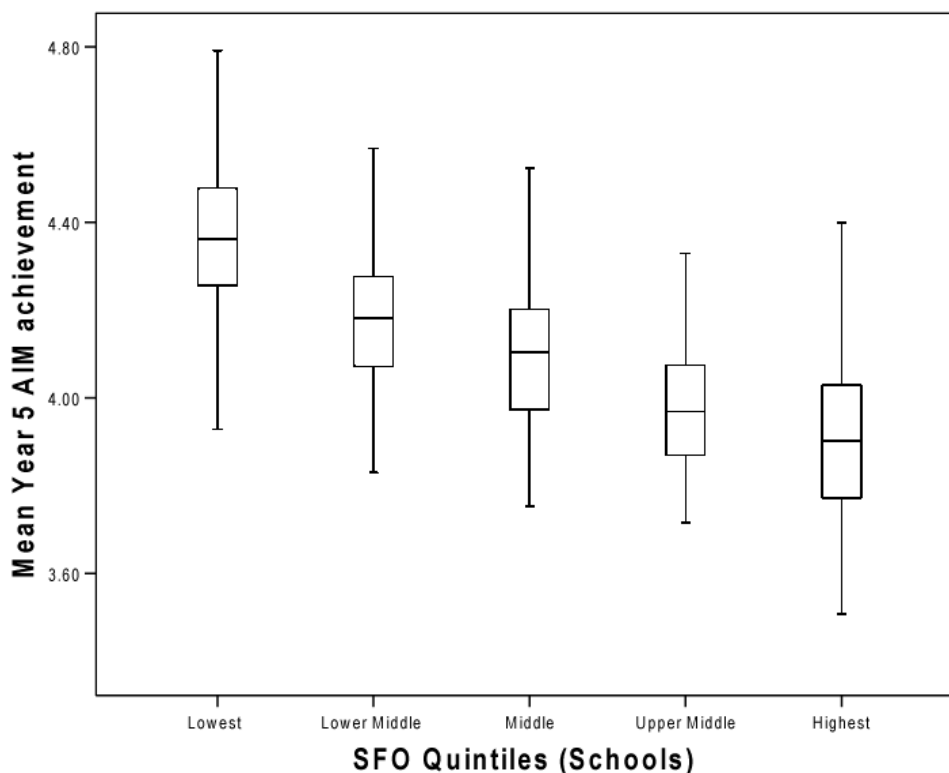
and the average reading score of the children attending it. Note, though, that at any given point on the social scale, schools vary in average reading achievement.

Figure 2 Year 3 reading means by social intake of metropolitan primary schools



By Year 5, gaps between schools have become consolidated. Figure 3 summarizes these in box and whisker plots. The depth of social differences can be seen in the fact that the midpoint of reading scores for the poorest fifth of primary schools barely reaches the 10th percentile of schools serving the most advantaged neighbourhoods. Again note that some of the schools in the poorest communities do reach the average for those whose parents are mainly managers and professionals. However, in the main these schools are widely separated.

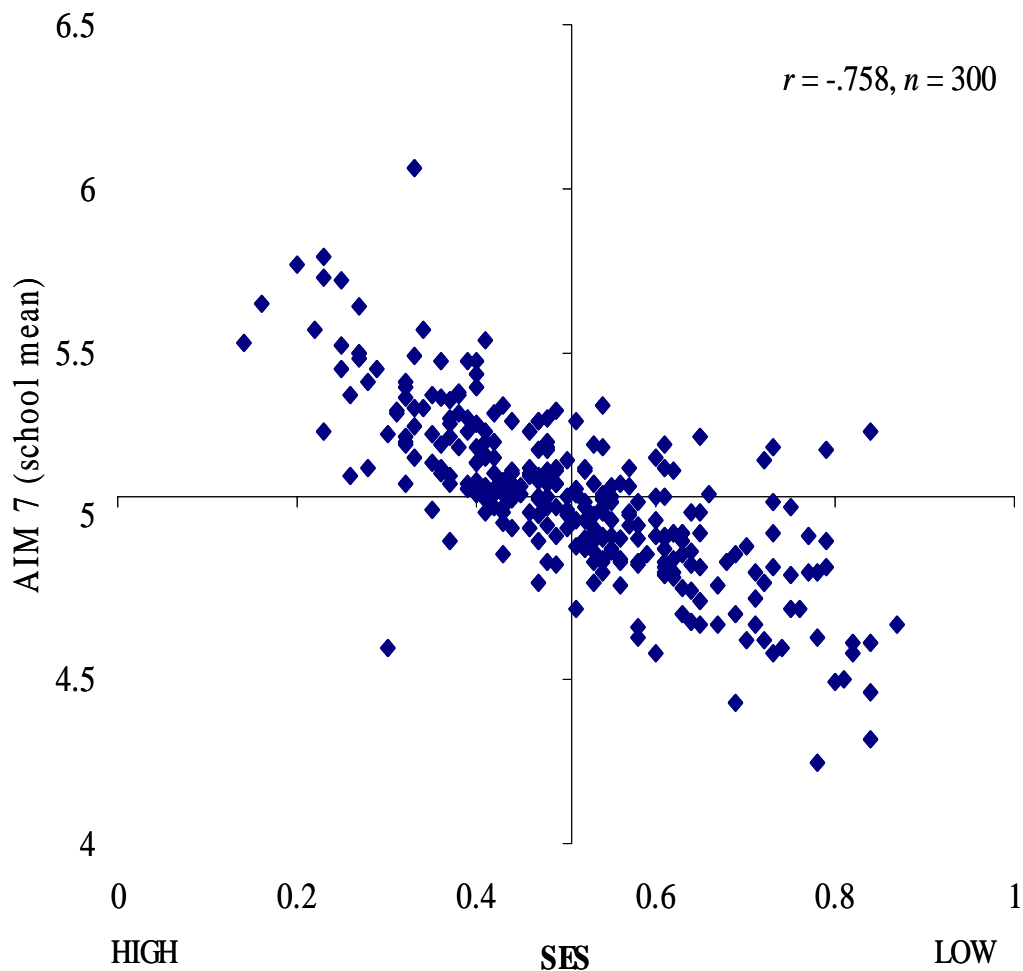
Figure 3 Year 5 reading achievement by SES quintiles



Our expectation is that schools should bring children together, give all of them the same opportunities, and as far as possible ensure that in basic learning they achieve equally well, regardless of background. But snapshots at different stages of schooling show that, if anything, children from different backgrounds are kept apart. Schools do not close the gap, but keep it open or even widen it.

In the first year of secondary school, the social patterns separating schools in terms of average achievement are found again (see Figure 4). The lower the SES intake to a public high school, the lower the reading scores. Here we should note an easily overlooked feature of differential achievement in public schools in Australia. In most States, the historical pattern has been for more educated and better-off families to use local public primary schools and then to enrol their children in various forms of selective secondary school, either public or private. Since the mid-1960s, this historical pattern has been reinforced by government policy. This has also encouraged parents to opt out of public primary schools as well, though this has not gone as far as secondary school transfer. The result is that a cohort of children in the lower grades of public secondary education is not as mixed as a cohort of children in upper primary school. It has been relieved, as it were, of substantial numbers of children from more middle-class backgrounds. This might be expected to make government primary schools more alike

Figure 4 Year 7 reading achievement by SES



in achievement terms. But in fact they appear to drift further apart. The box plots for Year 7 reading show that high schools serving the poorest communities are far below the standard of those serving wealthier communities, and there is very little overlap in the distributions. The transition to secondary school, even when accompanied by an outflow of more academic (or at any rate more aspirational) children, does not see a contraction in differences between schools, but a widening (see Figure 5).

The failure to improve levels of achievement over the later primary and early secondary years of school prepares the way for an outflow of weaker students towards the end of compulsory school. Figure 6 (above) shows that schools with poorer results in Year 7 are also more likely to have lower rates of retention to Year 12.

We can expect this relationship to vary in strength between different regions and

Figure 5 Year 7 reading achievement by SES quintiles

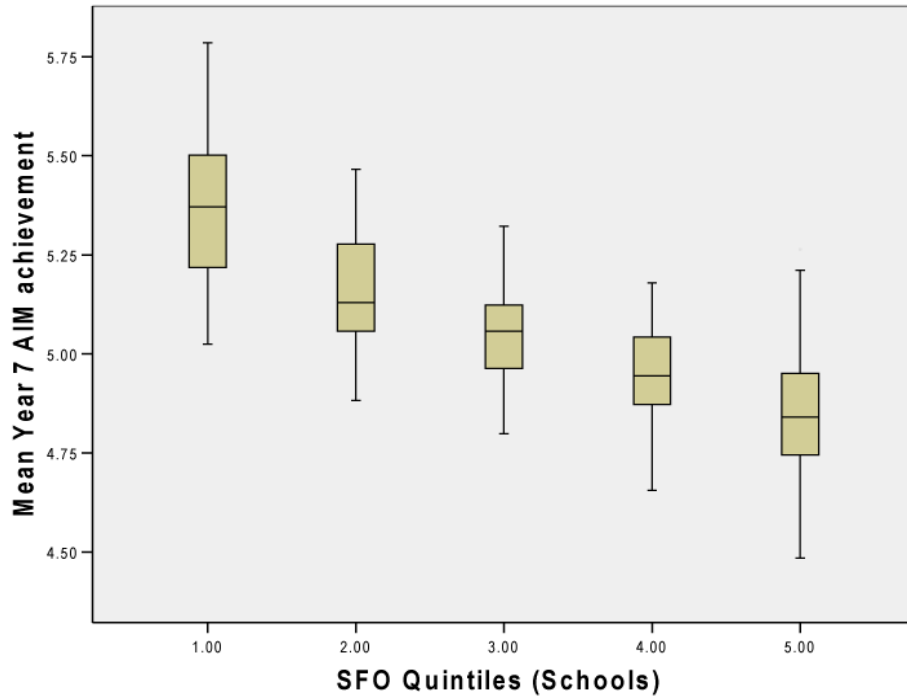
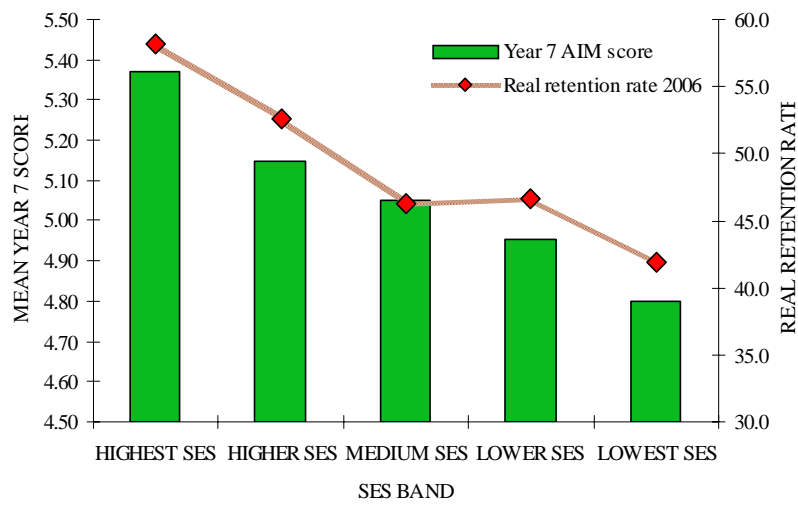


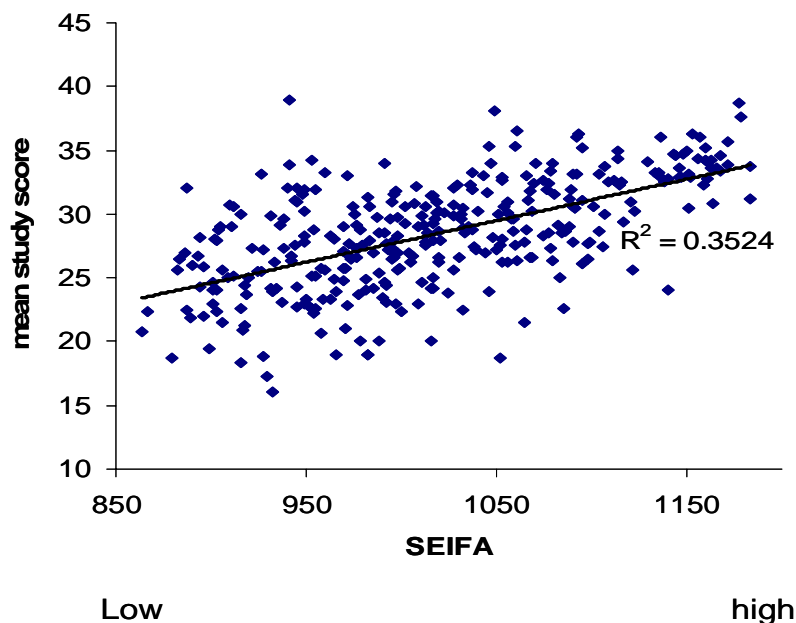
Figure 6 Retention and Year 7 reading achievement by SES quintiles



also at different points in the business cycle. For attrition involves both “flight from school” and demand for work, and is influenced by labour markets as much as by the achievement history of the individual. Nevertheless there is a strong element of anticipation in the link between how well a young person achieves in compulsory school and whether they attempt a program of studies in the post-compulsory years. What is it about the programs approaching them that causes them to bail out?

Interviews with teachers establish clearly a history of low achievement behind failure, but, on the other hand, a battery of cultural and professional resources behind success. Figure 7 reports mean study scores for all Victorian secondary schools in Mathematical Methods (a preparatory subject for university-level science and other courses). Schools are ranked by the SES of their postcode, which is a crude measure that does, however, capture the general relationship.

Figure 7 Study scores in Mathematical Methods for Melbourne secondary schools, 2004 by SES



High retention carries along failure. Students from poorer backgrounds are less competitive in more academically discriminating subjects, like preparatory maths. Since many university courses require these subjects, there is much greater risk to young people with few cultural or economic advantages of failing. Prudence might dictate more modest aspirations. But we will see later that there is little “safe space” anywhere in the academic curriculum, including in subjects in which universities

have little or no interest.

(2) From pattern to process: explaining unequal achievement

Why is failure at school not socially random? One temptation in educational thinking is to deny that failure *is* linked to social background. Refuge is taken in the fact that under-achieving children can be found in many, if not all schools. Refusal to accept that there are marked and persistent social patterns in achievement seems to be based on a fear of de-motivating teachers in poor schools. This leads to an heroic posture in which all schools are seen as equally able to lift standards and in which social environment is demoted as merely incidental. Teachers are restored to a pre-eminent position as responsible for most of what happens, and what they need is technique, commitment and discipline knowledge, not smaller classes, more time or more professional training and support.

The social patterns that we have illustrated in the previous section cannot be reduced to any simple failure of human agency, whether individual, collective or corporate. Nor do they constitute a pretext for resignation. We have to approach them in the way we tackle failure in other domains—by identifying barriers and developing strategies to remove or lower these. Moreover, we need to recognize that though social inequalities are persistent and display a pattern of reproduction, they need to be viewed over the long-term and within a wider context of social change. Today three in four young Australians complete school. At the end of the Second World War, perhaps 1 in 10 did so. Today about 1 in 3 school completers from the poorest tenth of the population enter university, a figure unthinkable thirty years ago. The calculus class of today contains a social mix of students that would not have been dreamt of when the first public high schools opened in New South Wales towards the end of the nineteenth-century. These indicators show that our schools are able to absorb large and diverse populations and to compete successfully by international standards. They can work better and more equitably. But that depends on the clarity with which we see the barriers and our ability to target strategies and resources effectively.

Social differences in achievement arise because (a) children are unequally prepared and supported to manage the cognitive and the cultural demands of school, and (b) schools differ in how they articulate these demands and in the mix of cultural and teaching resources they have available to meet these demands.

Social differences *widen* across stages of schooling because:

- (a) demands on learning and behaviour become more complex and difficult;
- (b) the cultural resources of poorer families decline in relative value;
- (c) social area processes accumulate *multiple disadvantage* in poorer schools;
- (d) parental strategies and public policies lead to a concentration of *social advantage*

in selective schools; and

(e) a hierarchical curriculum in the final years of school enables children from better-off homes to extend and capitalize on initial advantages.

When teachers and school principals are asked about the causes of under-achievement, their most frequent response is to point to home background issues. But there are two sides to the achievement gap. First there is what schools ask and how. Over stages of schooling, the intellectual and also the behavioural and attitudinal demands made by school intensify and become more complex. This is as it should be. For the purpose of the curriculum is to raise achievement—but for *all* children, not just some. Schools are not uniformly effective in how they work with children, and not uniformly effective in how they work with different groups of children. The programs and activities they devise vary in quality as does the teaching effort, both between and within schools.

The second side of the achievement gap relates to who students are and the cultural resources they bring with them, individually and as a group. These resources include language skills, achievement motivation, inter-personal skills, capacity to concentrate on an activity, to find pleasure in completing a task well, etc. Children come to school differently prepared in these terms—as very ably documented in Lareau’s ethnographic research (2000; 2003)—but also in their physical and mental health and well-being.

The task of school is to bridge the gap between the expectations embodied in curriculum frameworks and the resources which children make available to schools in the way of their development and education at home. Failure to bridge this gap leads to manifestations of stress—e.g., absences, suspensions, poor behaviour, drop-out—and to scholastic failure (see the accompanying diagram).

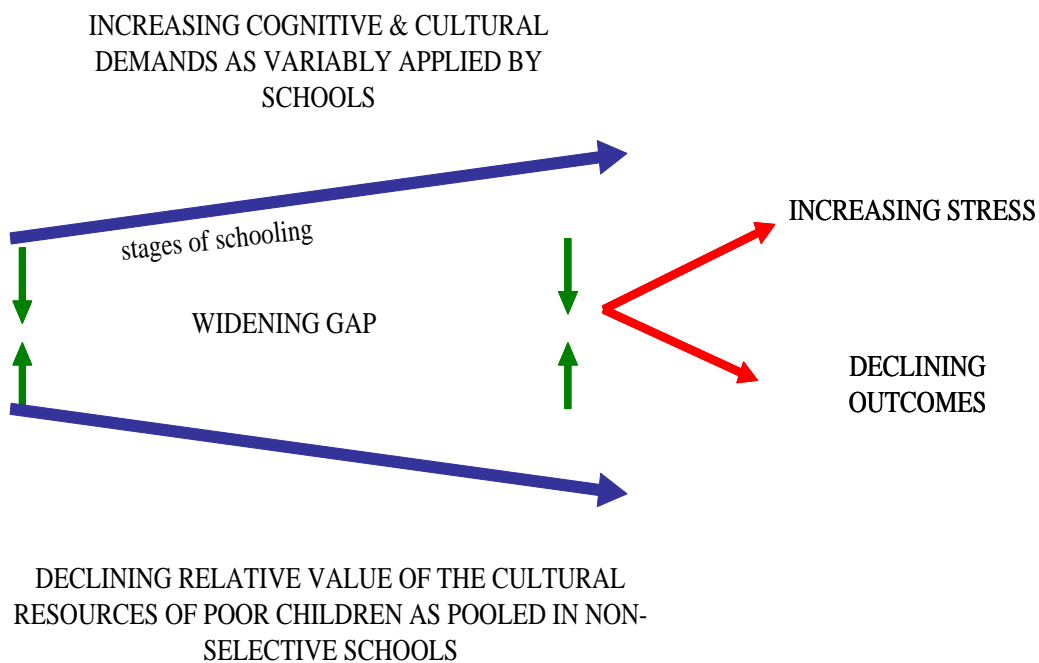
The difficulties that schools face in bridging the gap between normative expectations and cultural preparedness are evident in the growing proportion of children assessed by their teachers at successive stages of schooling as failing. For example, between Year 2 and Year 4, the proportions of children reading at the lowest benchmark in the Curriculum Standards Framework (CSF) (Victoria) in 2002 doubled; by Year 6, it had tripled; it continued to grow during secondary school, rising to 26% by Year 10 (see Figure 8).

More telling is failure in algebra. In Year 8, every fourth child was assessed as knowing little or no algebra. By Year 10, this had reached 36% (Figure 9).

The introduction of algebra illustrates the increasing level and complexity of cognitive demands made on children, but also the declining relative value of family cultural resources available to children to manage these demands. If children lack the verbal and numerical skills needed to produce expected learning outcomes in algebra,

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: EXPLAINING IT

WHAT SCHOOLS ASK...AND HOW



WHAT STUDENTS BRING TO SCHOOL, INDIVIDUALLY AND TOGETHER

Figure 8 Reading at the lowest benchmark by stage of schooling, Victoria 2002

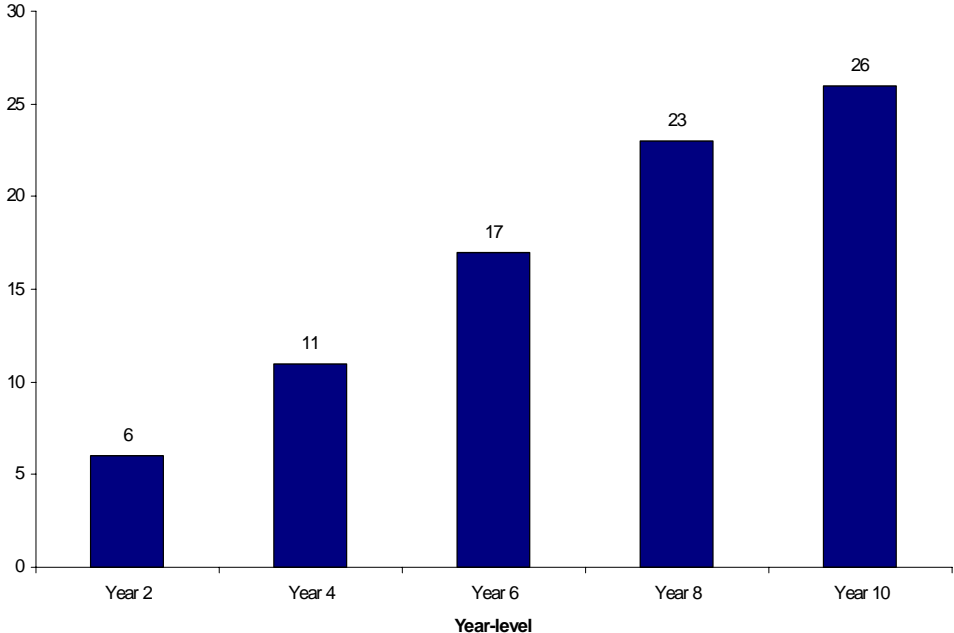
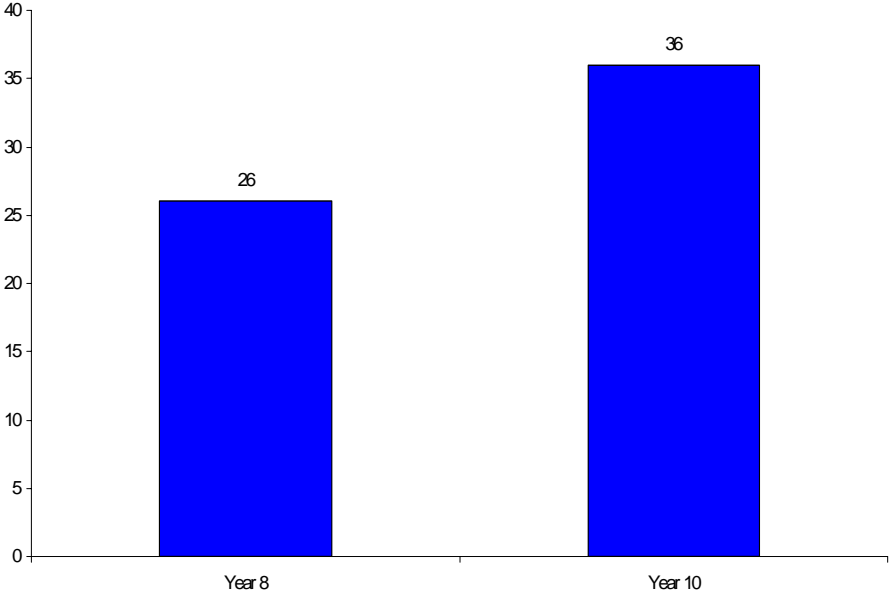


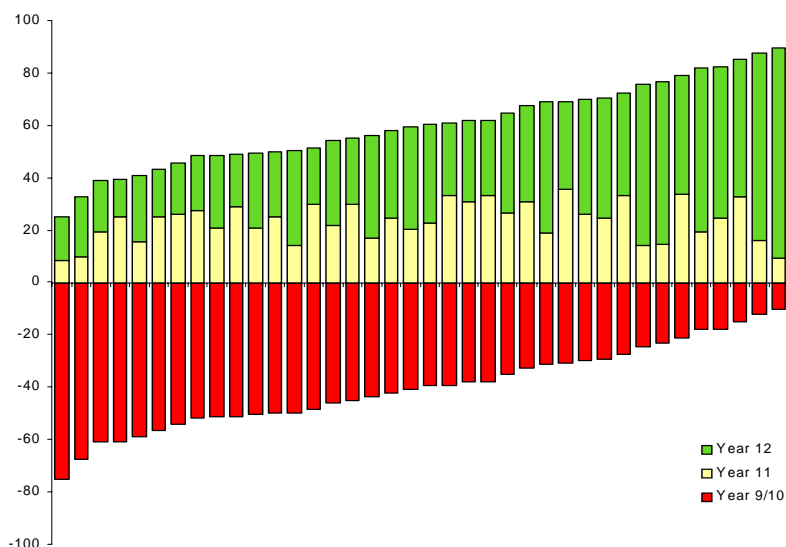
Figure 8 Algebra achievement at the lowest benchmark by stage of schooling, Victoria 2002



secondary schools have to fill the gap. When, as in California, students are *legally required* to pass algebra and schools are unable to bridge the gap, the results are devastating. In 2004, around 50,000 ninth-graders were examined in beginning algebra: 44% of them were failed (*Los Angeles Times* 20 January 2006).

Besides the growing complexity of the tasks, we need to stress the social nature of the learning environment itself. The cultural resources deployed by children are not only what they owe to their family, but what they borrow from their friends. The more socially segregated the school, the weaker the total mix of resources available to the student. They cannot learn from each other, help and support each other, be a model to one another. Instead they are pushed into a posture of collective defense against the demands made on them, a posture which reverses school values and endorses defiance and rebellion. In some public high schools in Melbourne, as many as 80% of mothers left school at Year 10 or below, while in others nearly all mothers completed secondary school and many hold post-school qualifications as well (see Figure 10).

Figure 10 Mother's education profile for schools in the northern metropolitan region of Melbourne, 2007



The transition years across upper primary and into lower secondary school are marked by declining student interest in mathematics and declining confidence. As children move into the more subject-oriented world of the secondary school, they are confronted with increasingly abstract material but are also viewed in the fragmented perspective of the subject specialist. Their own learning preferences are for activities which are practical and collaborative—where there is meaning, a sense of purpose, the energy of working with others, and something at the end to show for their efforts.

The subjects they rank highest all have these attributes, however different in content. They include PE, health, childcare studies, art, and computing/ITC. The subjects they rank lower are those that are abstract and involve working privately, concentrating on the task, not talking, not sharing.

These learning preferences reflect the emphasis in primary school on project work and activities in small groups in which collaboration is the norm. But both subject preferences and learning preferences are out of kilter with the hierarchy of academic subjects in the upper secondary years. In this hierarchy, abstraction, theory, remote meaning, lack of practical application, absence of context, private learning, competition against known as well as unknown others are the rule. The subjects that dominate the hierarchy of the upper secondary curriculum reward students who can set aside primary school preferences or who at any rate can combine private learning with strategic collaboration. Their focus is on marks and on subject-choice and examination tactics, and the economic incentives and their own academic self-confidence are strong enough to trade-off any claim on intrinsic pleasure or meaning.

For those students who have been less successful in the compulsory years, there are real dangers in how the curriculum is structured and in how courses or subjects are designed. Many such students are pressured by parents to take at least a terminal maths subject, even when they lack the skills needed to manage even the lesser demands that it makes. Language skills may be too poor to cope with non-mathematical (as well as mathematical) subjects, and students lack the confidence or sense of purpose to persist with material of doubtful relevance. They display, in the words of teachers, no “work ethic” or are apathetic. But is this really surprising? The hierarchical structure of the curriculum downgrades alternatives, fails to integrate “academic” and “vocational”, and to the extent that it does create “space” through more vocational options, is not sufficiently demanding, challenging or rewarding to engage students.

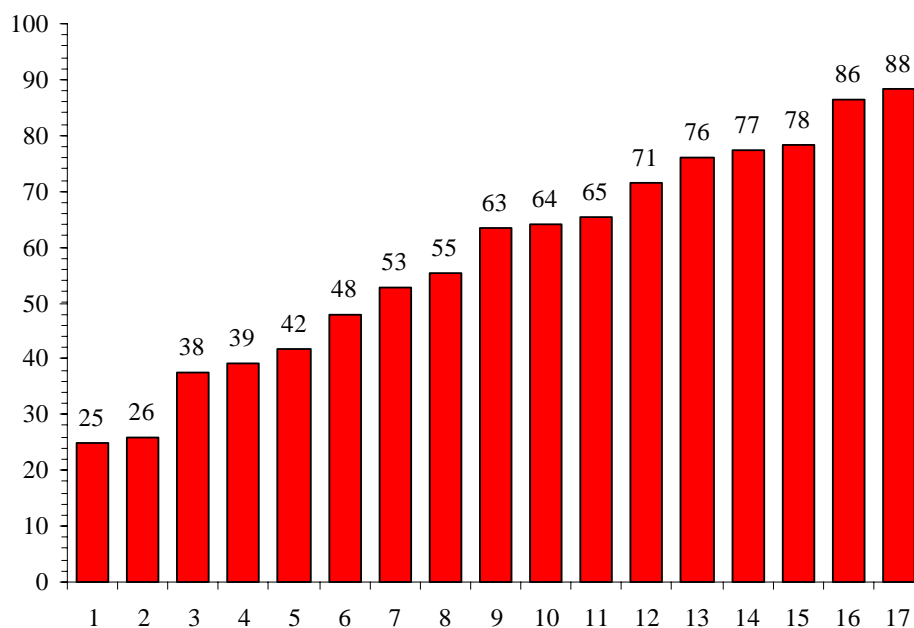
As an engine of academic discrimination, the upper secondary curriculum consolidates histories of success and histories of failure. But its influence reaches well beyond a merely final certifying role. The demands stored up in the upper secondary curriculum reach back to the lower forms of high school and even to primary school, and shape expectations and decisions, depending on the location of a school in the universe of all schools. The fear of failure—based on real probabilities—dictates a policy of adaptation in more vulnerable schools. Expectations about what is *manageable*, e.g., in the texts studied in English or the options chosen in maths, govern decisions (see Teese, Lamb and Helme 2009).

It is a different story in schools that are selective. Here the culture is one of academic *distinction*. The strategies of the most well-resourced schools to maximize chances of success begin early. They involve intensive supervision, testing, psychological

guidance, streaming, small classes and careful management of all student work. Life is made hard on students (to quote their teachers) so that they can distinguish themselves—in the high-end subjects that enable them to compete for high-demand courses in university.

A hierarchical curriculum requires a hierarchical school system to concentrate cultural and professional resources and set these against the most taxing subjects loaded into the curriculum. But this impulse also works its way through to create sites which are utterly depleted of the kinds of cultural resources needed for success at the high end. These “exposed” sites are repositories of multiple disadvantage and they are ravaged by failure. Figure 11 reports the rates of failure in the weakest maths subject in the VCE in the most socially segregated high schools in Melbourne. It shows that in some of these schools, nearly 90% of students fail.

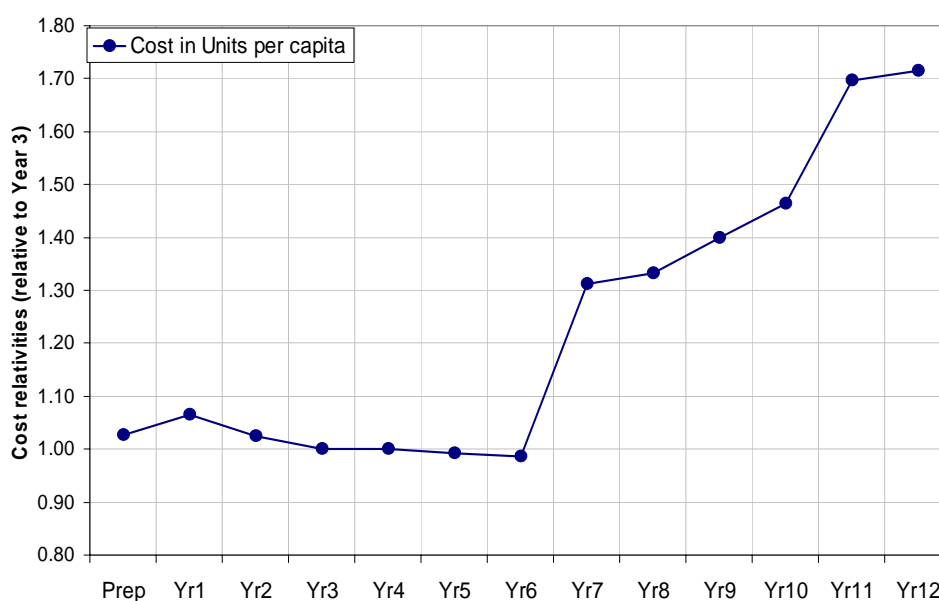
Figure 11 Failure in terminal maths in the most socially segregated, poor schools in Melbourne (%)



The severe social patterns in upper secondary achievement are, to repeat, not simply an end result of educational failure that began at birth, if not before. They reflect the way this level of schooling has traditionally been used as a servant of university selection and has never matured to a wider purpose, thanks to the conservatism of universities and their struggles for prestige and distinction amongst themselves. The needs of universities lead to a hierarchical curriculum, which in turn creates a

demand for “fortified” sites and at the same time, *within schools*, focusses resources on the high end of the curriculum, regardless of the effectiveness of the school (see Figure 12).

Figure 12 Expenditure relativities by year-level in a system somewhere in Australia

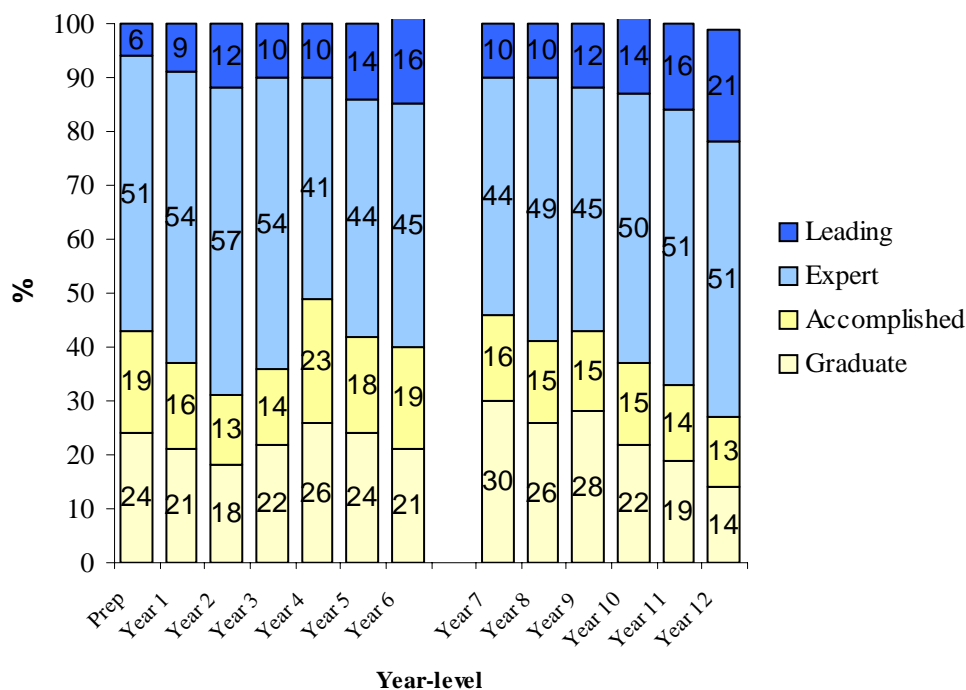


A common pattern in government and non-government schools across Australia is to invest resources heavily in the upper forms of secondary school. This is meant to cover smaller classes in specialist areas. A typical pattern is shown in Figure 13. But the effect is to drain the junior forms of resources, both in quantity and in professional experience. Just where the achievement gap widens—the “middle years” spanning upper primary and lower secondary—resources are withdrawn and concentrated at the top end of school to cater for those groups of students who do reach the final year (often a minority). If there is something “old world” about this approach, even about rewarding the oldest teachers with the least troublesome students, this is because it is the old world of low retention, kept old by the “new world” of League Tables. Thus both across schools and within schools, resources chase the best students within a framework of curriculum which allows the best schools to distinguish themselves in the service of the best universities.

(3) Tackling disadvantage

The system of structural inequality that we have described is far from working perfectly as an instrument of social reproduction. We have already noted some of the indicators of historical progress which remind us that social engineering through

Figure 13 Resource profile of each year-level by teacher classification (%)

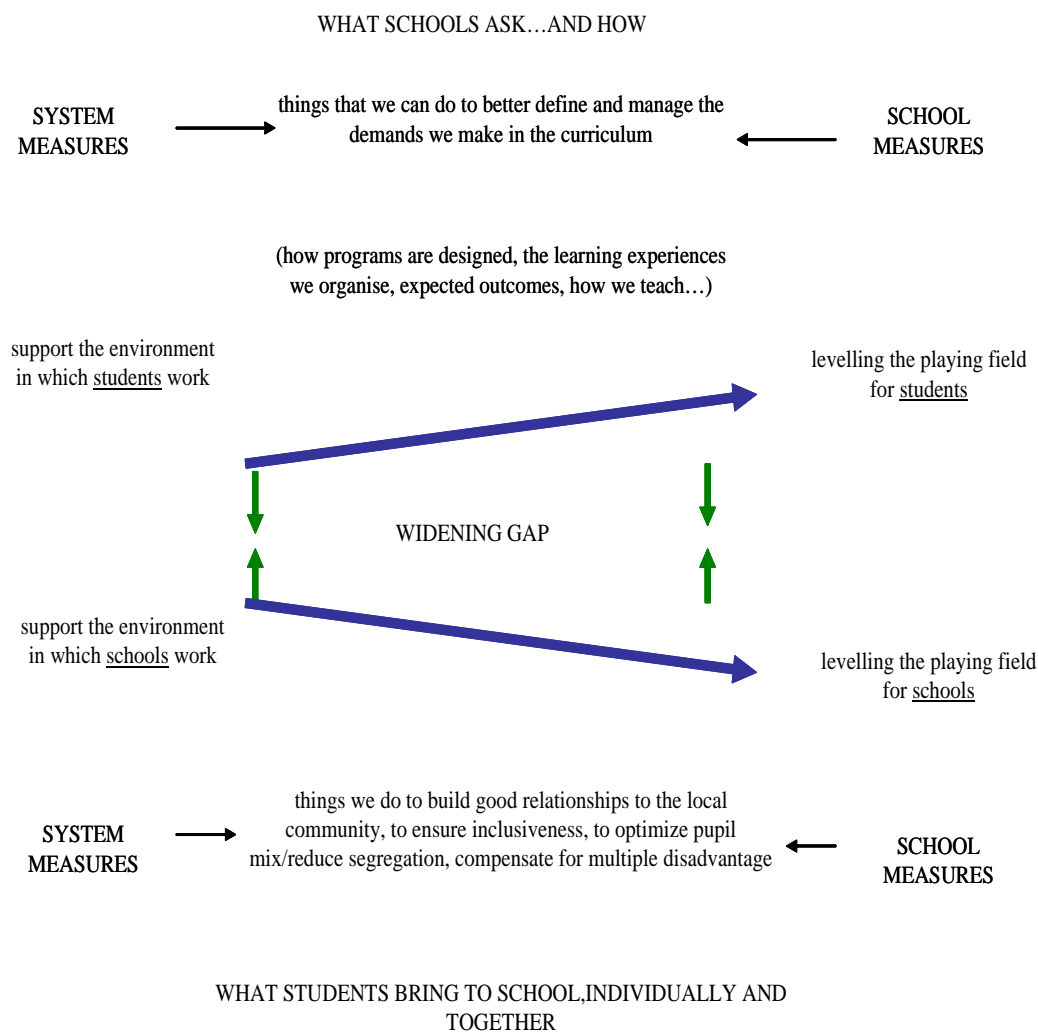


the education system is a very imperfect art. We have emphasized structure and culture—institutional arrangements, connections, practices, values—to counter the heroic view that inequality either does not exist or is due to the tendency for bad students always to attract bad teachers and for good students always to attract good teachers through a pre-established harmony. Without an understanding of structure and culture, we should have to accept this mystery which, moreover, would help to spend the few resources we have in an entirely fruitless and indiscriminate way.

Tackling under-achievement requires a mix of *systemic* and *school* policies. Systemic policies are actions which influence the school system as a whole or the social environments in which schools operate. Examples include measures to reduce teacher turnover adverse to poor schools, design of the curriculum, and the training of teachers. School policies are actions taken by schools to improve the outcomes and experience of students. Examples are early literacy, personalized learning plans, cross-age tutoring, curriculum offerings, transition support. It should be stressed that systemic policies cut across portfolios to include health, community services, employment, transport and housing.

The diagram in Figure 15 summarizes the focus and the level of interventions required to tackle disadvantage.

Figure 15 Tackling disadvantage by focus and level of intervention



One focus is on curriculum and teaching. The other is on local community or environment. Both schools and systems have to work on both these points of intervention. This holistic framework is very important because under-achievement requires an integrated and consistent approach. Schools, individually, cannot solve all problems, and on the other hand system policies must work with, not against what innovating schools seek to do. Given the fragmentary nature of government—

especially in the domain of school funding—this is difficult. But a harmonization of measures through clear and agreed priorities is necessary, otherwise the whole weight of change will fall on schools acting in isolation and against impossible odds.

Much of the equity effort in Australian schools relies on special purpose payments. This is a narrow and unsatisfactory approach to tackling social differences in achievement. However, because it does dominate thinking and does at least draw State and Commonwealth governments together (however harmoniously), it is important to discuss the issues that affect this approach.

Nevertheless we want to stress that overall the sums flowing through equity lines are very small and that equity cannot be achieved without considering how core or formula funding is structured.

(i) *purpose of equity funding*. The first issue relates to purpose. Historically we have set modest purposes for equity funding. This reflected a pessimism about what was achievable, based on research from the 1960s and relied on by the Karmel report (1973). There was a view that changes in outcomes could not be realistically expected—so at least quality of experience should be improved—or would cost the world (see chapters 9 and 3 of the report). When, later, a different view was taken, it centred on literacy, which again reflected minimal expectations. Behind both the original and subsequent views was the thought that schools ought to be *compensated* for out-of-school disadvantage, even if the actions they took resulted only in very modest improvements.

This view has underpinned the very modest historical commitment of the federal government to equity programs and the reluctance of State governments to spend much more heavily from their own funds. A wider view says that schools should be funded to *innovate*. They should aim at durable change through a *defined program approach* which is documented, evaluated and made more widely available. Innovation raises the stakes. But it also restores disadvantaged schools to a full place in the education system rather than as simply representing the “tail”. Disadvantaged schools have a big role to play, and for the benefit of the whole system, not only for their local communities. They should be funded very well, but subject to greater accountability and higher expectations.

(ii) *expectations*. Expectations need to embrace a wider range of outcomes than improvements in test scores. Key issues relate to how well teachers work with disadvantaged groups, what programs they offer, how they differentiate teaching strategies, the kinds of supervision or oversight of student progress they provide, the extent to which children are well-integrated in school, the efforts taken to train teachers on-the-job, to improve quality of instructional experience, student engagement and satisfaction, retention, and achievement in particular curriculum areas. Measuring

improvement simply by testing students on the “basics” leaves it open to schools to apply a whole range of strategies which do improve “performance”, but not achievement.

(iii) *which schools?* How we identify schools for the purpose of equity funding should relate to the antecedents of failure. What are we seeking to neutralize? The factors which give the strongest prediction of success and failure at school are socio-economic. Indicators such as educational and occupational levels of parents capture a range of socio-cultural processes which limit or advance the progress of children. The impact of how children are taught to use language, what stimulus they receive through play, the encouragement and rewards they receive for successful learning all impinge on their achievement at school. Socio-economic indicators target known differences in the relative quality of education in the home.

We distinguish between these indicators of antecedent influence and the signs or symptoms of stress in which this influence is expressed in the context of the demands of school. Poor attendance, suspensions, discipline problems, low student morale all betray a breakdown in congruence between what schools want and what students are able or willing to give. These stress signs cannot be used to identify schools for equity funding. This is because they are not primary causes, but effects. Moreover, were schools to be funded on the basis of stress signs, those schools that succeeded best in lifting attendance or resolving discipline issues would be penalized by being disqualified from further funding.

(iv) *indicator construction.* System authorities have approached the issue of ranking schools for equity funding by constructing *composite indicators* of disadvantage. There are problems with this approach in that the individual components of an index may not in all cases give a good prediction of achievement or may be highly inter-correlated (in which case they are redundant and potentially misleading). Looking at the relationships *amongst* predictor variables outside of their predictive power also presents a challenge. Data reduction techniques, such as principal components analysis, may summarize a lot of information, but not all of it can be considered equally relevant in the absence of knowledge of impact.

From another angle, attempts to pool information on a variety of sources of disadvantage—e.g., language background, Aboriginality, SES—assume that multiple disadvantage is best tackled through a single ranking measure, when in fact multiple lines of funding might be better, based on discrete measures of need.

The tables above are drawn from research on the Special Learning Needs index (SLN) that was formerly used in Victoria to allocate equity funding. They show the hazards of composite indexes, notably the inclusion of dimensions that either do not predict under-achievement or are actually positively correlated with success and do not need to be neutralized.

Table 1
Variance in Year 5 achievement explained by the former SLN funding components

Element (proportion in each school)	Percentage contribution of each element	Percentage of variance explained by each element	Significant or not	Direction
Mobility	7.9	3.2	Yes	-
EMA/YA	13.4	5.3	Yes	-
Family status	1.4	0.6	No	-
LBOTE	8.8	3.5	Yes	+
Family occupation	62.5	25.0	Yes	-
Indigenous	6.1	2.4	No	-
Total	100.0	40.0		

Table 2
Models of Year 5 achievement with SLN components

Element	Model						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Family occupation (Focc) (38.3%)	(Focc)	(Focc)	(Focc)	(Focc)	(Focc)	(Focc)	(Focc)
Mobility (Mob) (15.0%)		(Mob)					(Mob)
EMA/YA (EMA) (31.4%)			(EMA)				(EMA)
Family status (Fstat) (16.0%)				(Fstat)			(Fstat)
LBOTE (LBOTE) (3.0%)					(LBOTE)		(LBOTE)
Indigenous (Indigenous) (5.7%)						(Indig)	(Indig)
Disabilities (Disab) (6.9%)							(Disab)
<i>Adjusted R²</i>	38.3	38.8	39.1	38.5	38.9	38.9	40.0
Correlations		0.53	0.82	0.59	0.40	0.27	

Also of note in this analysis is the redundancy of some dimensions. For example, the inclusion of “family status” (single parent, etc.) variable gives no explanatory power, once other factors are taken into account. The biggest influence is clearly SES, and nothing is gained by adding other dimensions. However, even were there an improvement in the model, this would not necessarily mean that funding was best directed through a single line, based on the composite index.

While composite indexes might be favoured on the grounds that a single budget line gives schools more flexibility, when more funds flow through this line, greater accountability is required, linked to a defined program approach whose impact can be evaluated with a view to continued support and sharing.

(v) *which schools?* System authorities in Australia have in some cases been very generous in extending access to equity funding. Without naming them, some have allowed as many as 67% of schools to access funds, involving amounts as little as \$2,000. Others are more restrictive, e.g., 46%, and others again—including New South Wales—are still more frugal as regards eligibility. There is no obvious way in which the number of schools qualifying for support can be determined. But the broad point is at any rate clear: the more schools, the greater the dilution of the source and the less likely the impact at any given site.

Just as, socially, schools that serve more advantaged communities *concentrate* resources, both cultural (social mix) and financial (fees), the equity line has to do something similar—concentrate *professional resources* where cultural and financial support is lacking.

(vi) *how much support?* Similarly, if the principle is to concentrate resources, support should be *scaled to need* within the group of eligible schools. The idea that *all* eligible schools should get the same level of support is difficult to reconcile with the fact that need is relative and also that no need is served by excessive dilution. Moreover, the failure to scale support to relative need greatly increases tension around the cut-off point. A number of systems in Australia scale support, and where this is done there is less tension over eligibility.

(vii) *single or multiple lines?* We have addressed this question at several points earlier in our discussion. In our view, multiple lines are desirable where there is a risk that specific needs could be ignored in favour of broadbrush approaches of doubtful specific impact. The flexibility that schools seek should come through the total size of the package and minimal (but functional) lines of reporting.

(viii) *the accountability framework.* Government schools in Australia operate under a range of different (and evolving) lines of accountability. The accountability

requirements for equity funding appear to be very diverse and minimal, at least in some jurisdictions. If the emphasis switches away from “compensation” and towards “innovation”, the harvesting of fruitful ideas becomes critical. What works matters especially when the total equity budget is very small, and *knowing* what works is just as important. When poor schools experience high levels of turnover, conserving professional knowledge and communicating it are critical. So the accountability framework has to emphasize learning from each other, and thus must involve methodical evaluation and reporting. To put more dollars into equity depends on generating sound knowledge of what works in different contexts and enabling schools sharing similar challenges to pool their efforts and correct for the tendency of social and even policy influences to isolate them.

(ix) *systemic policies*. Equity policies are continually exposed to the risk of systemic policies which undermine equity. An example relates to teacher placement rules that favour turnover. High turnover in poor schools can only be durably reduced by improving operating conditions in them. They must be attractive places to work (and not simply more *lucrative* places to work in, if bonuses are paid). In other ways, too, systems give with one hand and taketh with the other. An example is the building of selective schools in areas whose existing schools can least afford a narrowing of pupil mix. This is an example of how a basic principle of educational policy is violated: concentrate, don’t disperse resources!

Taking a broad view, we see systemic policies as addressing six key tasks. These must be addressed to improve outcomes for disadvantaged groups over the long-term. They are:

- Ensuring high quality teaching skills and professional commitment to manage different contexts
- Ensuring that all schools have access to the teachers they need
- Creating an inclusive curriculum for all stages of schooling
- Ensuring that the curriculum is accessible and manageable from whatever location in the school system
- Minimizing the extent and consequences of social segregation in the school system
- Creating effective pathways.

The relevance and strength of these policies needs to be tested against a map of the school system. Do we, as a system, ensure that a quality teaching force is at work at every site? Do we, as a system, ensure that *all* schools have access to the teachers they need? Is the structure of the curriculum and the design of courses appropriate for children and young people in *all* schools? Is the curriculum accessible? Can all courses be taught widely and well across the school system? Do we, as a system, seek to minimize social segregation by making comprehensive provision and supporting schools serving the most disadvantaged communities? (See the OECD

report, *No More Failures* 2007). Finally, do we ensure a coherent range of pathways leading to valued destinations for all young people, or is provision patchy, disconnected and lacking the incentives for a bigger effort from students?

(x) *relieving the vertical pressure on schools*. Given our attention earlier to the institutional environment in which schools work, it would be remiss of us not to draw attention to the importance of tackling the relationship between schools and universities. The main policy thrust here has to be on achieving greater diversity in higher education. The more that universities differ in the courses they offer, the way they teach, their assessment practice, and the links with the world of work, the less they need to compare and rank school students on a single scale of assumed universal worth. Probably the biggest change would be a shift in teaching and assessment practice away from the tradition of “large group” teaching (mass lectures) and exams. To put the matter somewhat crudely, the better that universities are at teaching, the less they need to rely on selection. They do not need to select on the basis of *prediction* of success, if they can better *produce* success. Traditionally the pedagogical burden has been transferred from universities to schools. In an age of mass retention and mass demand for university, this is not sustainable. Schools must work more effectively with young people across the whole age-group. They cannot do this uniformly well if, instead, their task is diverted to training a minority who, alone, can cope with the traditional university teaching regime.

(4) Conclusion.

Here are some brief points to summarize our discussion:

- Tackling under-achievement needs a social focus
- Policies cannot be run just through supplementary funding
- Consider an equity loading within core
- Measures of general benefit (e.g., across-the-board cuts in class size) should come second
- Equity programs are to innovate for durable gain
- They must be well-funded
- Effort should be concentrated, not dispersed
- Scale support to relative need
- Criteria should be socio-economic, not behavioural
- Multiple program lines to address specific needs
- Systemic measures for quality teacher training, curriculum, locational disadvantage and pathways
- Cross-portfolio measures for environmental change and joined-up services.

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