



Submission to the Inquiry into the Education Achievement Gap in the ACT



About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges that Canberra has been built on the traditional lands of the Ngunnawal people. We pay our respects to their elders and recognise the displacement and disadvantage they have suffered since European settlement. We celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and ongoing contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) is the peak representative body for not-for-profit community organisations, people living with disadvantage and low-income citizens of the Territory.

ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS' objectives are representation of people living with disadvantage, the promotion of equitable social policy, and the development of a professional, cohesive and effective community sector.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

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Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ACTCOSS	ACT Council of Social Service Inc.
CaLD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CIT	Canberra Institute of Technology
DET	Department of Education and Training
ESL	English as a Second Language
IECB	Indigenous Education Consultative Body
MYS	Multicultural Youth Services
NCVER	National Centre for Educational Research
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
SIEC	Secondary Introductory English Centre
QCOSS	Queensland Council of Social Service
TIMS	Trends in International Mathematical and Science Study

Introduction

ACTCOSS welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Inquiry into the Education Gap. This submission outlines ACTCOSS' perspective on the extent that socio-economic status impacts on education retention and participation. The submission will particularly focus on four areas of improvement: support for students from low socio economic backgrounds, the need to address adult education, support for students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and students from Refugee backgrounds. ACTCOSS acknowledges that engagement and achievement in education is multi-faceted and intergenerational. Disparity in education is often a by-product of other areas of disadvantage and thus a wide range of inter-related grievances need to be considered and addressed in order to close the education gap.

Socio-Economic Background

Socio-Economic background includes a wide range of factors including education, professional status and income. The literature illustrating the correlation between poor education levels and poor socio-economic status is extensive and is reiterated by the most recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) report.¹ An academic study by Rothman revealed that even within the same school, a student who comes from a higher socio-economic group will achieve better results than a student from a lower socio-economic group.² The three most cited dimensions of poor socio-economic status are; parental occupation, parental education and wealth correlated with low tertiary education of parents. Collins et al presented evidence concluding that socio economic status was a contributing factor in the differences in performance among Year 12 students in Victoria.³

A major reason for why low socio-economic status has a negative impact on education is related to the availability of resources in such environments. Data on family possessions is connected to socio-economic status in two ways: firstly as a proxy for family wealth and secondly as a measure of direct family support for learning through the provision of resources such as ability to study in an appropriate environment. The 2000 PISA study found a positive relationship between the extent of home educational resources and reading achievement.⁴ For example, the number of books in a student's home has been shown to be a predictor of achievement in several other studies.⁵

Literature indicating that poor education levels have an intergenerational effect is extensive. In 2002-2003, the Trends in International Mathematical and Science (TIMSS) study of student achievement found learning outcomes in both Maths and Science was higher for those whose parents had completed a University degree.⁶ The Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) noted that poor attendance is an intergenerational problem.⁷ Participants in the 2008 QCOSS Social Policy forums argued that where parents did not value education, they were less likely to encourage their children to attend school.⁸

¹ S. Thomson and L. de Bortoli, *The Performance of Students in the Australian Capital Territory on PISA*, Australia Council for Educational Research, 2008, p.30

² Erebus International, *Review on the Recent Literature on socio-Economic Status and Learning*, 2005, p.2.

³ F. Argy, *Education Inequalities Within Australia*, The New Critic - Issue 5, 2007

⁴ Erebus International, 2005, *Review on the Recent Literature on socio-Economic Status and Learning*, 2007, p.6

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ QCOSS, *Submission to Queensland Education Performance Review*, May 2009, p.3

⁸ Ibid.

The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission has highlighted the need to pursue social inclusion in a human rights context.⁹ The Commission puts the view that it is typical to approach social inclusion on a needs basis, with an emphasis on acknowledging and meeting the needs of disadvantaged groups, who are also generally considered to be marginalised. This approach runs the risk of considering individuals who 'don't fit' as being deficient in some way. It also requires people to meet set criteria before they are entitled to support, rather than place an onus on services to adapt to meet individual needs.

In a human rights context, by contrast, the emphasis is on upholding the capacity of individuals to determine their own direction and supporting them to achieve it. The focus is on inclusion and support, which leads, in practical terms to addressing the range of barriers which prevent individuals from achieving their goals.

Case study: Galilee

Galilee provides an alternative education program for disadvantaged and at risk young people between the ages of 12-16 in the ACT. Galilee takes a social inclusion approach, recognising there are a range of factors impacting on a young person's ability to be engaged with education and schooling.

The Galilee School has a small ratio of students to teachers which seek to re-engage youth to the school system through a holistic approach. The staff at the school refer to the school as a last educational resort for at-risk youth. Children are referred to the school from the Office of Youth and Family Services and the school is committed to breaking the cycle of socio-economic disadvantage burgeoned through poor education retention. The staff sees emotional wellbeing of students as paramount and seeks to re-establish basic opportunities for young people to rebuild their lives.

Galilee provides breakfast and lunch to improve the health and wellbeing of students and their ability to concentrate. It also recognises that a chaotic home life may impact on access to food. Galilee also recognises children need sleep, adequate nutrition and structure to assist them in educational participation.

An example of Galilee's work can be seen through the example of "Dan". Dan was a 17 year old young man who passed through Galilee a few years ago. He was one of seven children in his family. At various times, his brothers and sisters had been removed, and reinstated into the family unit due to

⁹ Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission *Social inclusion and human rights – strange bedfellows on the road to an authentically Australian inclusion agenda?* Paper to Australian Social Policy Conference, 2009.

issues of neglect. Dan's father had an extensive criminal record. Neither his mother nor his father worked. Dan had left school at the age of 13, when he began working for a relative as a labourer. He enrolled in Galilee as it became apparent to him that he needed to improve his literacy and numeracy skills to assist with basic everyday activities. Dan's attendance at Galilee fluctuated, especially towards the end of the year. His mother was about to give birth to another child, and Dan was often needed at home to assist with child caring duties. However, with encouragement, Dan was able to graduate with a Year 10 Certificate. During the last term, Galilee facilitated a work experience program and an apprenticeship for Dan to undertake when he left school.

Recommendations

- Promote a broader social inclusion approach to the development of education programs
- Explore the expansion of holistic programs, in both mainstream and specialist settings, to address education gaps caused by disadvantage

Adult Education

Despite the generally high educational standards of the ACT community in comparison to the rest of Australia, there is a significant number of adult Canberrans whose literacy skills are not sufficient to meet the demands of everyday life. This was highlighted in *On the Same Page*¹⁰, a report published by ACTCOSS in early 2009. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) research has shown around 28,000 ACT residents have only attained the lowest level of literacy skills; with a further 50,000 people attaining only level 2 levels of literacy. Given that Level 3 is regarded as the minimum level required to cope with the means of everyday life, this means that 78,000 people in Canberra can be regarded as having inadequate levels of literacy.¹¹ It should also be noted educational levels have remained static in the past decade.

Literacy learning is made more attractive when it is “embedded” in other learning activities, such as computer literacy, health literacy and parent programs.¹² These arrangements offer benefits for people experiencing social exclusion, such as confidence to take control of important aspects of their lives. Some researchers have argued that the future for adult literacy provisions involves partnership between literacy educators and other sectors.¹³ Literacy education should be provided by a range of organisations, including formal language providers and adult and community education providers. Furthermore, people may be better engaged in learning if activities are conducted in places where learners may feel more comfortable such as community venues familiar to them. ACTCOSS is of the view a wide variety of approaches to literacy provision is needed, to fit accordingly to the various circumstances of people in society.

Education, and in particular literacy is crucial to supporting an individuals social inclusion. People who are in circumstances of social exclusion often juggle several issues. These may include low income, poor housing, family breakdown, poor physical and mental health, poverty and unemployment. Given there are many factors impinging on an individual in these circumstances, that an integrated, ‘whole person’ approach is needed to close the education gap. Educational initiatives which aim to attain equity among students should be viewed as part of a matrix of support, designed to enhance life circumstances of those who are socially excluded. This requires a broad approach to the objectives, content and delivery of services in ACT schools and in community programs.

¹⁰ ACTCOSS, *On the Same Page*, February 2009, p.2

¹¹ ACTCOSS, *Review of Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program Services Purchasing Arrangements*, Submission to the Commonwealth Department of Education, employment and Workplace Relations, July 2008, p.3.

¹² Ibid, p.4

¹³ Ibid, p.5

To improve educational outcomes for children and young people, it must be recognised adult educational outcomes and opportunities also need to be improved.

Recommendations

- Increase accessibility of adult literacy programs through the facilitation of greater connection with other community sector programs.
- Consider the recommendations of *On the Same Page*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

In recent years, the gap in education engagement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students has been well articulated. Governments across Australia have expressed the intention to “close the gap” in education. Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students disproportionately come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, studies have found that it is not the only factor influencing educational disengagement.¹⁴ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from higher socio-economic backgrounds do not perform substantially better than those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.¹⁵ This suggests other factors need to be considered. It may be that the performance of Indigenous students is more specifically linked to other aspects of their experience.

Schwab argued that Aboriginal people appropriate aspects of western education they view as being significant to them.¹⁶ These include cultural competence, cultural maintenance, material resources and social resources. When developing policy to address Indigenous under education, the above factors should be carefully considered.

Western education may be reconciled with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural elements with the greater incorporation of an Aboriginal learning community in the ACT. A learning community would provide more support for children and their families by offering access to other services within the school. It may offer children's health services, provide adult literacy or parenting classes, after hours internet access, or opening the school library to the broader community on weekends. In creating an Aboriginal learning community, it would be necessary to think beyond traditional methods of educational delivery, exploring holistic approaches which can support students and families in an effort to improve outcomes for both students and the community.

An institution that moves beyond the traditional parameters of schools to encompass wider community needs has a range of benefits, and several initiatives may be inspired from this model.¹⁷ This institution could act as a vehicle which brings together community and family support for education in an environment which specifically focuses on Indigenous education, families and the community.

¹⁴ L. Greenwood, T. Frigo and P. Hughes, *Message for Minority Groups in Australia from International Studies*, Australian Council for Education Research Conference, 2002, p.27

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ R. G Schwab, *Educational 'failure' and Educational 'success' in an Aboriginal Community*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Discussion Paper 161, 1998, p.6

¹⁷ Ibid.

ACTCOSS is aware of some work being undertaken across the ACT public school system to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. For example Narrabundah Primary School has a holistic educational and support program with special focuses on physical health and wellbeing and positive life experiences. Every day, the school flies the Australian, the Aboriginal, and the Torres Strait Islander flags. The programs have facilitated greater collaboration between parents, students and the broader school community. Parents of the students often run activities such as painting, dancing and cooking. These activities facilitate greater family engagement and interest in the learning outcomes of their students.

Case Study: Gugan-Gulwan

Gugan-Gulwan Aboriginal Youth Corporation has a very successful literacy and numeracy program for Indigenous youth. Preventive action shields young people from poor employment opportunities in the future and reduces stress associated with social isolation and alienation from the community.

The Literacy and Numeracy program at Gugan-Gulwan ranked highly when measured against the assessment framework for Best Practice Principles developed through the Australian Institute of Criminology. A recent report by Gugan-Gulwan *Helping Mother Teresa* noted the success of the program and presented several recommendations to improve access to the program. The recommendations included a proposal for Gugan-Gulwan to be able to facilitate school based CIT programs, enabling young people to complete Year 10 or Year 12 studies at Gugan, as well as ensuring funding is provided to ensure sustainability of the program into the future and that consideration is given to the establishment of a similar facility on the north side of Canberra. Unfortunately, funding for the Literacy and Numeracy program is due to finish in December 2009. Without funding this successful program will not continue.

The benefits of the program can be seen through “Jeremy”. Jeremy is 18 years old, originally from North Queensland who moved to Canberra 3 years ago. He was attending a mainstream High School in Canberra where he was labelled by staff and students as a “case-book delinquent”. He was demonstrating severe attitude problems and had a poor record of attendance. He was told he would not be able to graduate with a Year 10 Certificate, prior to being referred to Gugan-Gulwan. Ally, the head teacher at Gugan-Gulwan worked very closely with Jeremy, conscious of his moods. Jeremy undertook the literacy and numeracy program and with the extra support given by the teachers and staff at Gugan-Gulwan, he successfully obtained his Year 10 Certificate. Jeremy is currently studying business at the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT).

Recommendations

- Recognise the complexity of the barriers to Indigenous education
- Support the expansion of programs that facilitate Indigenous Learning Communities
- Ensure adequate on-going funding for successful programs such as the Literacy and Numeracy program offered at Gudan-Gulwan
- Expand access opportunities for programs such as the Gudan-Gulwan Literacy and Numeracy program, facilitating greater access for students from Northside schools.

Refugees

The third group identified as a group at risk of educational disadvantage are refugees. When educating students who come to study in Canberra schools after being granted refugee status the pre-migration conditions need to be recognised. Such experiences may include armed conflict, living in a refugee camp or detention centre, all of which undeniably have a negative effect on education. It can be difficult to distinguish between the stresses caused by past suffering with the challenges of re-adjustment in a totally different country, despite knowing that quality of life will improve in the new setting.¹⁸

Compounding the lived experience of trauma is the difficulty associated with family breakdown and adaptation to a different life. As some families are broken up, the roles played by family members change. Girls often assume the role of a mother, taking care of their younger siblings, and boys the role of the family patriarch. Redistribution of such a power structure inevitably causes conflict. During the resettlement process, families who have not seen each other in several years may also find themselves living together again. The changes in relationships, brought about by circumstances where parents and children have not spent much time bonding, may also lead to conflict. In addition, young refugees may struggle with the language, and face racism at school.

Some African countries have a less formal approach to education than western education systems. Certain groups of refugees come from a highly oral culture, where all significant social transactions occur verbally. For example, the languages of Dink or Neur are languages without a written form. Literature indicates that members of oral cultures have their own highly developed strategies for transfer and retention of information.¹⁹ A recent study by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) revealed that Sudanese learners have extensive experience or oral language learning but many have no experience of using written forms of language.²⁰ Those in the study who did have some experience with written language used it to primarily replicate religious texts. On arrival, some refugees report being unfamiliar with ways of operating in a culture which uses written forms of communication daily.

In a consultation with Multicultural Youth Services, it was stated that the prime reason children did not want to attend school was due to bullying. There have been incidents where students had been made fun of due to their accents, been spat at, and had rocks thrown at them. Programs which

¹⁸ National Centre for Vocational Education Research, *Classroom Management Strategies to Address the Needs of Sudanese Refugee Learners*, 2009, Executive Summary.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

encourage all students to learn and appreciate a diversity of cultures will assist in the development of a sustainable educational environment.

Relationship building exercises should be encouraged and developed by the ethnic community to which the refugees belong.

Case Study: Multicultural Youth Centre

The Multicultural Youth Centre (MYS) offers a range of support mechanisms to at-risk youth from CaLD backgrounds. The barriers to education participation they encounter are very broad, incorporating issues flowing from racism, loss of identity, trauma, family breakdown and low self-esteem. MYS provides case work during the day and a space for children and young people to socialise and relax in the evenings. Young people are provided with assistance with finding housing, filling in forms and seeking legal or medical advice.

MYS are concerned funding will not be ongoing for these important programs. Funds are needed to ensure MYS can keep offering their services to young people at risk of disengagement from education.

MYS report that when young people first arrive in the ACT, they are extremely excited about starting their new life. They are very enthusiastic about participating in schools, especially in the Secondary Introductory English Centre (SIEC) offered at Dickson College. Unfortunately, once they have finished the program, and are transitioned into mainstream school young people have shown a lack of interest in continuing education. The work is seen as being too hard and most refugees have not obtained sufficient English language skills required to complete set instructions. Greater support and a more graduate transitional process would ensure students are better able to adapt to the school curriculum.

An example of the complexities that Youth Worker's at Multicultural Youth Services work through can be seen through the example of "Elie". Elie is a 21 year old refugee. At age 12, the school in her village was bombed. Elie escaped and travelled throughout parts of central Africa until she found a refugee camp in Kenya. She had no contact with her immediate family during this time, and assumed responsibility for looking after two of her younger cousins who had also attended the school. Elie was eventually reunited with her father and her brother at the refugee camp. The family filed for humanitarian entrance into Australia. Although her family lived in Charnwood, she had to travel to Tuggeranong for school every day. Elie was soon reunited with her mother. However, a few days after her mother joined the family in Canberra, Elie's father passed away. Elie had not had much contact with her mother over the years, and readjustment to life together was extremely difficult. Her mother was still suffering from the effects of trauma. Elie ran away and began her own life separate from her mother. Multicultural Youth Services supported Elie during this difficult period. Elie is currently

studying Medical Science at the University of Canberra, while raising two children with her partner.

Recommendations

- Expand anti-racism programs in schools
- Provide ongoing support for family counselling and relationship building initiatives currently available through community organisations
- Allocate further resources to transitional programs for refugee students.

Existing Support Mechanisms in the ACT

ACTCOSS acknowledges there are educational support systems for students who are experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, students from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or CaLD backgrounds already in place. The ACT Education system has a limited bursary allowance for senior and primary students, which allows payment for school supplies and excursions, generally at the discretion of the school principal. The ACT education system has made a concerted effort towards Reconciliation by incorporating Indigenous education into the school curriculum and some schools are progressing the development of Reconciliation Action Plans. Such programs support the increasing of student understanding of, and respect for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural perspectives. The Indigenous curriculum is developed based on advice provided to the Department of Education and Training (DET) by the Indigenous Education Consultative Body (IECB) whom hold community consultations with Indigenous community members in the ACT. Community consultations are strongly supported as it allows members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to discuss issues they consider as important educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. ACTCOSS urges the Committee to investigate how much Indigenous participation is involved during consultation periods to create school curriculums.

ACTCOSS' urges the Committee to consider holistic approaches to addressing socio-economic disadvantage through the engagement of the whole community. Schools need to be supported to be community hubs, facilitating life-long learning opportunities and the engagement of parents and carers in their students learning.

The P and C Council of the ACT note that their membership and involvement is made up of a homogenous group of parents. There is very little involvement from the wider CaLD community and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The P and C have expressed the desire to reach out to a wider group of people. The ACT Government could assist with this process by encouraging principals and teachers to support diverse participation in the P and C. The ACT Government could also adopt more culturally aware and inclusive practices and programs in the schools. Furthermore, by advocating for flexible and family friendly work practices, the ACT Government would facilitate greater parental involvement in their child's education.

As outlined in the 2009-2010 ACTCOSS Budget Submission *Prioritising People: A People Centred Approach to Today's Challenges*, ACTCOSS is concerned about the lack of non-school options for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and refugee young people in the ACT. A number of mentoring programs have struggled to secure recurrent funding, including a community program which supported at-risk young refugees to obtain certificates of attainment in mechanic spray painting and other skills.

Earlier this year, ACTCOSS advocated for the introduction of a Refugee Strategy, to complement the Multicultural Strategy.²¹ Education was raised as major issue among young refugees, particularly in the emerging Sudanese community. The current education system is not adequately flexible to meet the needs of refugees, which is indicated by high drop out rates from school. There are currently some programs in the community providing excellent results including the piloting of a two year flexible year 12 program by the Secondary Introductory English Centre. This program has been successful in keeping vulnerable and marginalised young people in schooling. The possibility of expanding this program should be further explored.

Recommendations

- Explore the development of programs to support greater diversity in school support mechanisms, such as P and Cs
- Support the facilitation of greater Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in developing curriculums in schools
- Explore issues to do with education access and attainment through the ACT Government's Refugee Strategy
- Investigate options on how the Secondary Introductory English Centre could be expanded

²¹ ACTCOSS, *Submission on the Draft Australian Capital Territory Multicultural Strategy 2009-2012*, March 2009, p.21

Conclusion

In addressing issues relating to educational attainment a range of factors need to be considered. A student or young person, concerned with housing problems or other poverty related matters may not be particularly concerned about attending or participating in school. Mechanisms that support broader familial engagement and consider the range of factors impacting on a young person's life will develop practice and programs for better engagement.

Participation in education is a learned behaviour that is inter-generational. By investing in Adult Education programs the ACT Government can support adults to develop the necessary skills to participate fully in society while putting an end to what may be considered a viscous cycle. Issues to do with educational attainment can not be seen as a 'children and young people' issue alone.

Educational attainment is an important issue in overcoming disadvantage and we thank the Committee for taking the time to consider this matter. Parity in education will lead to a generally healthier society.

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