

Section 4

Lifelong learning for priority populations

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Introduction

There are a number of groups within society (in addition to Aboriginal peoples) who are vulnerable, and/or have special needs with respect to learning and development, and who can be considered as priority populations. Many of them are also significantly disadvantaged.

Socioeconomic disadvantage takes many forms. For some, it is the inability to obtain the essentials of life such as shelter and adequate food; for others, it is a matter of low income; for others, a problem of discrimination and exclusion from opportunities in society ⁽¹⁾. Defining disadvantage only in terms of poverty or low income minimises the importance of access to appropriate services, safe environments, and the quality of housing or level of education that is available ⁽²⁾. A complete definition needs to extend beyond a lack of economic resources to encompass many of the serious environmental, structural and social issues faced by individuals, their families and their communities ^(3, 4). Examples of these can include under- and unemployment, homelessness or transience, discrimination and racism, unsupported lone parenthood, educational under-achievement, admission into state care, violence and abuse, and behavioural and mental health problems.

For many disadvantaged groups within the population, the impact of social inequality limits their capacity to influence change, and makes them more vulnerable to experience poorer wellbeing and fewer opportunities for educational achievement and secure employment. Some of these groups include people with disabilities and their families; young people with experience of the care and protection system; young people caring for family members with disabilities; and migrants and refugees from a range of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds and for whom English is not their first language. Many disadvantaged Australians have not only interrupted learning experiences but have also been excluded from education ⁽⁵⁾.

Supporting priority populations

In order to meet the needs of priority populations in South Australia, they must be identified as a priority and the extent and nature of their special needs described. For some of these groups, there may only be population-level data available rather than data at a small area level; for others, they may, in effect, be 'hidden' if their locations, needs and challenges are undescribed. A lack of quantitative and qualitative information about these priority populations can make it difficult to plan and deliver services and specific interventions which may improve their life opportunities, and their wellbeing, learning and development needs.

However, a discussion of their situations, drawn from available practice, policy and research, can be a useful starting point to identifying the resources required to meet their diverse needs, especially with respect to learning, education and development.

Education and knowledge help to empower individuals and allow them greater decision-making, agency and autonomy with respect to their own lives ⁽⁶⁾. Educational achievement also relates to many other aspects of life such as employment, wellbeing and health, and participation in social, cultural and civic activities in the community ⁽⁷⁾.

Low income and jobless households

The material standard of living enjoyed by individuals and households depends primarily on their command of economic resources, both in the immediate and longer terms. Income varies across the life span and does not alone determine material quality of life ⁽⁷⁾. Other factors are the extent of unfulfilled financial commitments (financial stress), and the level of accumulated wealth, which can buffer the income of an individual or household.

It has been estimated that a full-time job is needed to produce sufficient income to raise people above the poverty line in Australia ⁽⁸⁾. Un- and underemployment continue to be major causes of poverty in Australia, and employment only provides an escape when it comes in the form of a full-time job ⁽¹⁰⁾. As many of the new jobs created over the last two decades have been either part-time or casual, they have not been sufficient, by themselves, to protect workers and their families from poverty ⁽⁸⁾.

Jobless families include not only those who are unemployed but also those not participating in the paid labour market. Around two-thirds of these families are lone parents, and more than 80% of lone parents are women ⁽⁹⁾. In Australia, jobless families are about six times more likely to be in poverty than working families; and 70% of all poor children live in jobless households, the highest level in the OECD ⁽⁹⁾.

Thus, households with low incomes and/or no adult in employment or education and training face disadvantage across many domains of life. There are reduced opportunities to engage in a range of activities, including formal and informal avenues of learning and education, for all members of these households. For the adults, there may be limited prospects of increasing skills and competencies; and the stress generated as a result of having low income and no employment can have adverse effects on family cohesion and wellbeing and physical and mental health ⁽¹¹⁾.

For children and young people, living in a jobless household can have many unfavourable consequences, and may lead to the intergenerational transmission of economic disadvantage. Unemployment has been linked to truancy and non-completion of schooling, family break up, spouse abuse, substance use, illness and premature death ⁽¹²⁾. Furthermore, a child's learning and development depends on access to economic resources during the first fifteen years of life, and future income, socioeconomic position and relative economic success can suffer ⁽¹⁰⁾. Children and young people also need role models to follow if they are to proceed to education and training opportunities beyond school ⁽¹³⁾. This is made more difficult if such models are not evident in the home. The transmission of joblessness across generations undermines both equality of outcomes and equality of opportunity ⁽⁹⁾.

Joblessness can generate tension and conflict in families, with resulting poor health, family disruption, housing instability and social exclusion, resulting from the loss of social and professional contacts in the workplace ⁽¹⁴⁾. However, while poor health and disability are more prevalent among jobless families and are significant additional barriers for some households, many jobless lone parents have good health and do not experience severe disability ⁽⁹⁾.

It has been argued that the main policy factor contributing to high family joblessness in Australia has been that of requiring lone parents to actively look for work ⁽⁹⁾. A number of policy initiatives have been proffered, with one alternative for families with preschool children being the (re)introduction of a Jobs, Education, Training (JET) type scheme, using a facilitative approach designed to encourage sole parents into the work force either directly, or through education and training ⁽⁹⁾. Policy initiatives in this area should be assessed for their likely impacts on children's learning, development and wellbeing ⁽¹⁵⁾.

Homelessness

People experiencing homelessness have a diverse range of circumstances and needs, but are among Australia's most socially and economically disadvantaged ⁽⁷⁾. They are a heterogeneous group, with complex needs requiring a wide range of service responses, in addition to the provision of shelter ⁽¹⁶⁾.

Children, young people and adults are likely to experience adverse educational, social and health consequences as a result of being homeless. Homeless children and young people may suffer emotional and behavioural problems such as depression, low self-esteem, anger and aggression and are likely to have disrupted schooling ⁽¹⁷⁾. Their parents are also at risk of depression and stress and

may be unable to provide their children with the care and support they need. Family violence and relationship breakdown are also common reasons for parents with children seeking assistance from welfare and other agencies ⁽⁷⁾.

In addition to physical and mental health problems, homeless people are also at risk of other negative outcomes. Homeless individuals often live within hostile environments, and are therefore more likely to be subjected to acts of violence, crime and abuse ^(18, 19). Furthermore, homeless persons are highly marginalised, alienated, and stigmatised. This often leads to degraded social skills, and deprives these people of adequate emotional or cognitive stimulation ⁽¹⁸⁾.

On Census night in 2006, there were 105,000 persons who were homeless in Australia ⁽²⁰⁾. In 2006, 58% of the homeless were in the younger age groups (under 35 years) and 42% were aged 35 or older. Twelve per cent of the homeless were children under 12 years accompanying their parent(s), and a further 21% were teenagers aged 12 to 18 (mainly on their own) with 10% being young adults aged 19 to 24 years. With respect to education and learning, it has been estimated that only about a third of homeless teenagers have retained some connection with school, with the rest not in any employment, education or training ⁽²¹⁾. Aboriginal peoples are more likely to experience homelessness than other Australians, and were over-represented in all age groups.

Since the last Census in 2001, there has been a decline of 21% in the number of homeless youth aged 12 to 18 (living on their own), as a result of effective early intervention services targeting homeless and at risk youth. Cross-program service delivery with a single point of contact for employment, housing, educational and personal support is a recent innovation for young homeless people ⁽⁷⁾. However, there has been minimal early intervention to assist homeless families with children who have been badly affected by the declining supply of affordable housing, and their numbers have increased by 17% ⁽²⁰⁾.

As part of efforts to address homelessness, education is sometimes provided to homeless people, usually for the purpose of making the homeless recipients better able to find and maintain employment or housing by focusing on vocational or life skills ⁽²²⁾. However, a recent and innovative approach for assisting homeless adults to reengage with society relies on the provision of tertiary-level education in the humanities, offering education from an academic rather than a welfare framework ⁽²³⁾. Early results show that Catalyst-Clemente is a practical educational solution that has resulted in enhanced life opportunities and choices for disadvantaged Australians ⁽²⁴⁾.

Refugee and recently arrived migrant groups

Refugees are defined by the United Nations' 1951 *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* as people who 'are outside their country of nationality or their usual country of residence and are unable or unwilling to return or to seek the protection of that country due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion'. In addition to those people who enter Australia under visa categories that identify them specifically as refugees, there are others of the same ages and backgrounds who have been through similar experiences in those countries, and whose profile is therefore like that of a refugee ⁽²⁵⁾. They face the same challenges as refugees within the education and training system.

While many students from refugee backgrounds achieve educational success, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that numerous people arriving in Australia under the refugee and humanitarian program are also failing to attain a level of education that will ultimately allow for their successful integration into the Australian community ⁽²⁶⁾. Severe disruption to, or an absence of formal education and learning and development, and poor proficiency in English before arriving in Australia along with significant emotional, developmental and physical traumas are major barriers for many in attaining outcomes within the mainstream education system. Their impact depends on a number of factors such as the inner resources of the individual, the access to and the quality of family and community support and the societal environment of the host country. When these fail, disengagement and unemployment can lead to marginalisation and social exclusion, welfare dependency, and ultimately, considerable difficulty in participating fully in the new society ⁽²⁶⁾.

The significant issues that new arrivals must contend with can be overwhelming, from trying to find affordable accommodation, enrolling children in school, looking for work and/or getting overseas qualifications recognised, finding family members and negotiating a whole new system and culture, and all the time trying to work through the traumas they have left behind. Both newly arrived adults and children are coming to terms with loss of self-identity, uncertainty about the future, and loss of family. In most cases, they have not had any control over the events that forced them to leave. Research indicates that the quality of support provided in the early period of settlement and beyond has a significant bearing on how well refugees are able to face the practical and emotional challenges of establishing new lives in a new country ⁽²⁶⁾.

The physical and emotional health effects from refugee life experiences are likely to affect individuals' education and learning ⁽²⁷⁾. During resettlement, these experiences may lead to individuals to display post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms ⁽²⁸⁾. Therefore, students from refugee backgrounds attending educational courses are likely to be affected by the mental health-related burdens resulting from their refugee life experiences, in addition to the consequences of disrupted educational histories.

Therefore, in contrast to many learning and development theories that advocate for the use of past experiences, the previous experiences of students from refugee backgrounds may actively work against the process of participating in learning ⁽²⁹⁾. However, such education experiences may serve as a basis from which individuals can transform their lives through securing new learning and capabilities to engage more productively in social and economic life ⁽³⁰⁾. Therefore, the issue of readiness to learn for students from refugee backgrounds is not simply one of possessing the capacities to participate in the experiences, but also includes both physical and psychological dissonance that the students might encounter during learning. Other barriers, including English proficiency, style of Australian education, and family obligations and expectations, may prevent young refugees from progressing through the education system ⁽³¹⁾.

Education and training institutions have a unique role in providing an environment which can nurture resilience and reduce the vulnerability of these students ⁽³²⁾. The provision of a 'transformative' education (where expectations are made explicit and relationships between teachers and their students are crucial to effective teaching) requires a clear understanding of how both the students' socio-cultural heritage and refugee life experiences may affect their learning activities, and how learning experiences can productively assist these students to reach particular learning goals ⁽³¹⁾.

Similarly, educational and learning institutions need to develop ways of engaging refugee and migrant families, as families are often eager to be involved but face barriers such as not understanding the system or language difficulties ⁽³²⁾. Connection to family and community is the basis of social cohesion, and of a strong identity. There is a clear need to consider complex and diverse needs of family, to see young people within the context of their family and community, and to focus on building the strengths and resilience of families and communities. There is also an imperative to encourage social connections between refugee and migrant young people and other young people to enhance their support networks.

In general, young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds demonstrate high levels of strength, resilience, resourcefulness and understanding⁽³³⁾. At the same time, they regularly experience marginalisation in relation to housing, health, education, employment and access to social and recreational opportunities as they resettle in Australia. These result when community structures do not take account of their needs. This undermines the basic human rights of these young people as well as their capacity as individuals to be fulfilled. This, in turn, negatively impacts on the capacity of Australian society to be the best that it can be⁽⁷⁾.

For refugee and migrant young people, a socially cohesive society includes a welcoming environment where they can form trusting relationships; participate fully in community activities; and feel supported by peers and family⁽³³⁾. It also allows them to formulate achievable goals in their lives. They are able to retain their cultural heritage while also feeling connected to the broader society. Finally, they have full and equal access to the various institutions (such as education and employment) and the benefits of society (material benefits such as housing and income, and social benefits such as decision-making and community participation and support)⁽³³⁾.

Children and young people in the care and protection system

For children with experience of the care and protection system, their learning and development are influenced not only by their family circumstances, and the efforts of foster and relative carers, and child welfare agencies, but also by the support provided by other agencies, such as the mental health and school systems⁽³⁴⁾. Education makes a significant contribution to the development and wellbeing of children and young people, and is an important gateway to future employment and life opportunities. For many children and young people in the care of the state, school is their safest and most stable environment and can provide social connectedness, development of capabilities and relationships and friendship^(35, 36).

Children under guardianship have ability and can succeed⁽³⁷⁾. However, a history of interrupted school attendance due to relocation and unstable placements, in addition to disabilities, learning difficulties, disrupted relationships and attachments, emotional and behavioural problems, and poverty, can mean that the educational needs of children and young people in the care of the state are not met⁽³⁸⁾. Furthermore, lost educational opportunities have a cumulative effect on children in care as they move through the various stages of learning and development⁽³⁷⁾. These factors have consequences for their prospects for future employment and

wellbeing. There is also a link between poor academic achievement and higher than average rates of homelessness, criminality, drug abuse, and unemployment amongst care leavers. Education remains a significant gateway through which young people can pass from care to adulthood, to employment and to effectively participating in community life⁽³⁸⁾.

Unfortunately, the majority of students in out-of-home care currently achieve lower learning outcomes, particularly in literacy and numeracy; suffer from educational gaps and learning and other disabilities; have specific issues relating to development at key stages of schooling; and exhibit a range of problematic behaviours. They are less likely to continue within mainstream education beyond the period of compulsion; are more likely to be older than other children and young people in their grade level; on average attend a larger number of primary and high schools than other students; and missed substantial periods of school through changes of placement⁽³⁸⁾. Factors underpinning non-attendance relate to instability and a lack of continuity in placements, and poor relationships within the school, with some teachers (e.g., low expectations and lack of understanding) and peers (e.g., exclusion, bullying and being older than peers).

In 2003, children in the care and protection system in years 3, 5 and 7 at Australian government schools who participated in department-based reading and numeracy tests had lower mean scores than other children on both reading and numeracy tests across each year level. Data also indicated a decline in the proportion of children on orders who achieved national benchmarks from Year 3 to Year 7, particularly in numeracy. Indigenous children on orders recorded 'significantly lower test scores' than other children on orders⁽⁷⁾. The frequency and timing of placement and school moves play a crucial part in preventing children in care from achieving the levels predicted by their earlier test scores⁽³⁹⁾.

There are significant educational and other systemic barriers which impact on the learning and developmental outcomes of children and young people in care⁽⁴³⁾. Both the child welfare system and the education system can contribute to poor educational outcomes for children in care⁽⁴¹⁾. Issues such as frequently changing staff, lost or incomplete records or no individual education plan, minimal monitoring of educational progress, a paucity of specialised and remedial services, lack of engagement, and frequent changes in schools all contribute, as do higher rates of being kept back a year and of absenteeism, tardiness, truancy and school dropout^(38, 41). These students may also have greater needs for extra help, as the prevalence of disabilities is high. In 2008, it was reported that the

prevalence of disability was 39% for children in care in the DECS system (27% with language and communication disabilities and 12% with an intellectual, physical or sensory disability) ⁽³⁷⁾.

Evidence indicates that one-on-one assistance both for students (mentors, tutors and school support officers), and for carers of children with special needs as and when required, are important predictors of the educational progress for these students. There is also evidence that students who participate in activities such as subject-focused study support, sports, music, art, dance or drama improve in academic attainment, attitudes and school attendance. Other studies found that these forms of spare time experience were important in increasing the resilience of children in care ⁽⁴²⁾. Lack of access to support services and lost opportunities for funding extracurricular activities have a cumulative impact on children as they move through the various stages of education and development, from preschool, primary school and secondary school, through to vocational and tertiary education.

Learning occurs and needs to be encouraged in all settings. Access to preschool and, to some extent, formal childcare, also offers opportunities for learning and development for younger children, and for some carers, provides additional support. Help may also be needed to sustain developmentally enriched environments at home.

Children and young people in care have a right to participate in education and realise their potential. They must have access to a range of educational options in the public and non-government sectors that are responsive to their needs, if they are to progress successfully into vocational and higher education opportunities ⁽⁴⁴⁾. There is much that can also be done to overcome the significant obstacles they face with recovering from trauma, changing schools, and early neglect.

People with disabilities and their families

Disability can take many forms – physical, intellectual, emotional, learning, sensory and so forth – and clearly has a significant impact on development, learning and wellbeing of the individuals so affected, their siblings and families. People with disability include those who were born with disability and those who acquire disability through accident, ageing or illness during their life. Their carers and families can experience high rates of mental health problems, poorer physical health, employment restrictions, financial hardship and relationship breakdown ⁽⁴⁵⁾. Compared to Australians without disability, people with disability are more likely to live in poverty, to have fewer educational qualifications, to be out of work and experience inequality ⁽⁴⁶⁾. Around 20% of the general population reports some form of disability ⁽⁴⁶⁾. The prevalence of

disability among Aboriginal Australians is higher than for other Australians at all ages, and rates of severe disability are at least twice as high ⁽⁷⁾.

The *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* includes Article 24 which recognises the right to education and requires measures to ensure equal access to education. People with disabilities and special needs need be considered in the provision of all education, development and learning programs, including preschool, childcare and early childhood education, and access to before school and after school care. They may require assistance with or access to assistive technologies in relation to education and training, and their family members may require other respite and support services.

Students with disabilities are often at risk of being labelled, abused, exploited, neglected or rejected; and educators may attempt to provide for their needs in specialised places away from other students and with different cultural and social norms ⁽⁴⁷⁾. The educational needs of children with disabilities can be met through their inclusion in mainstream classes, specialised services co-located with mainstream services, or in separate facilities, according to the needs of each child. A lack of support for inclusion, however, may drive parents into choosing specialist settings despite their desire for their child to attend local schools. Greater resources are also required to ensure a child's full participation not only in the classroom but in all aspects of school life, including excursions and sporting and cultural activities ⁽⁴⁷⁾. Support is particularly critical in transitional stages of schooling, such as when a student is moving from primary school to high school or from a more supported special education setting into a mainstream school ⁽⁴⁸⁾.

Most students with disabilities are able to develop and learn and should be encouraged and given the required support to do so. They enrich school communities and teach us about the strengths of diversity. Students with disabilities need educators with positive attitudes to counteract society's prejudices, and with specialised training to maximise opportunities for learning and development, so they are able to achieve their rights and entitlements as students and as valued citizens, and are prepared for post-school life. Failing to provide them with an appropriate education limits their potential to lead productive, independent adult lives. In 2003, only 30% of people with a disability reported having completed year 12 compared to 49% of those without a disability; and 16% had left school at Year 8 or earlier, as opposed to 5% with no disability ⁽⁴⁶⁾.

Post-school educational inequalities for those with disability are also present, with only 14% completing a diploma or higher qualification (compared to 28% for those without a disability). Furthermore,

educational achievements and outcomes from VET programs are relatively poor for students reporting a disability, although there is considerable variability between types of disability⁽⁴⁹⁾. In 2003, VET students reporting a disability had generally low educational attainment levels, with almost half having only completed Year 10 or lower⁽⁵⁰⁾. The poor educational performance of students reporting a disability may have been due to their educationally disadvantaged position, rather than their disability. With disabilities such as hearing/deaf, intellectual, acquired brain impairment and vision, the actual disability explained little, once other student characteristics such as age, sex, educational background and course studied were taken into account⁽⁵⁰⁾. By contrast, both student characteristics and the disability itself directly impacted on the low completion rates of those with a physical or mental illness or a medical condition. Overall, it is not helpful to treat students with a disability as one group, as the direct effect of the disability on academic performance differs between groups.

There is also a need for education authorities to recognise children and young people caring for family members with a disability, and seek adequate supports for the whole family to prevent children having to take on inappropriate caring roles. This includes recognising children who are both primary and secondary carers. Children and young people with caring roles face significant challenges maintaining school attendance, completing their schooling and participating in the social and sporting activities of their peers⁽⁵¹⁾.

Similarly, children with a sibling with a disability can miss out on opportunities through the demands on parental time, and emotional and economic resources; and may need support to cope with the perceived stigma or attitudinal issues from their peers at school or in the community. As a result, they can feel isolated and become 'at risk' for a range of emotional, learning and physical health problems, which can continue into adulthood. Siblings are regularly overlooked both within their family and by agencies, even though they are likely to have the longest relationship of anyone with the person with special needs⁽⁵¹⁾. Appropriate and timely support from teachers and other educational staff will help them to feel less isolated, to build resilience, and to be more likely to develop, learn and complete their education.

Addressing the needs of priority populations

Populations with special needs should be provided with additional supports so they can reach their educational, development and learning goals. This

may mean resources from within educational systems as well as those from other government and community sectors. Staff who work with members of these groups need specialised training, ongoing professional development, cultural sensitivity and understanding, values and attitudes that are inclusive and non-judgmental, and a commitment to working with individuals, their families and communities to improve learning and development outcomes.

When all these elements are in place and our society has become more accepting of difference and supportive of rights and interests, we may see the educational and learning outcomes for these disadvantaged population groups move closer to those of our most advantaged citizens, and South Australia will be a more socially inclusive community.

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