

OPINION

An audit for educational disadvantage

Valerie Yule, 15 August 2008

True measures of educational disadvantage are the proportion of young people who leave formal education unqualified in anything and even illiterate, and the numbers of adults who cannot cope in jobs, who cannot apply simple arithmetic to shopping or gambling, and who have learned no constructive leisure interests.

The economic costs of these disadvantages are enormous. Sending your own children to a "good" private school is no escape from the costs that you pay for those least privileged who will clog the welfare and justice systems.

Let us all back Julia Gillard's determination to tackle educational disadvantage, because it has many causes, and many are not soluble by government money or free laptops. Annual assessment of schoolchildren's progress is essential, but other audits are just as important (and some of the detailed ongoing assessments that can be imposed on teachers actually prevent them getting on with teaching).

Every disadvantaged school needs the public support of its local community and of the whole region. It should not be shamed.

The shame is if it is not improved in the next 12 months.

Let communities have public annual audit of their local schools' progress to reduce disadvantage. And let families and communities themselves try to prevent their children starting school already educationally disadvantaged.

Here is a shopping list. How much will be bought in the coming financial year?

Disrupted classrooms are such a major cause of educational disadvantage that I have always been shocked that our society allows this. Where individual teachers have difficulty, there could be more in-school and in-service aid to help them learn better public speaking, "presence" and other skills to maintain interest and attention - which they should be taught at university in the first place.

Beginning teachers should start with orderly classes so they can become practised in actually teaching - not thrown first into classrooms requiring a continuous struggle before any teaching can be attempted. And of course, individual disrupters also need attention for what problems may be provoking them.

When a whole school or district has problems with disruptive students, a range of actions is needed.

Disadvantaged parents and their children need to be convinced of the value of being educated; that it really offers a better chance of jobs and happiness and that educated children are of value to the whole family, not lost to their parents. Even Prep children must be able to see the value of what they are supposed to learn - which advantaged children come to school already knowing.

When most local parents support the school, then representatives of the law can hear the complaints and impose fines on parents who molest and harass teachers and sentence them to learning more themselves. An important aim must be to prevent revenge arson by parents, students or ex-students, and to set standards of behaviour for these parents' children to follow when they are in class.

"No parents beyond this point" was a common notice even in the 70s. Many American schools now have guards, metal detectors and appear like prisons with their high security. This increases educational disadvantage, and makes quality of school life impossible. We must never copy.

We could restore resident caretakers with people-skills; somewhat similar to the past before the uninvolved and changing contract cleaners. Many had a role in informal companionship and mentoring with the lads, including informal workshop tuitions. Making pigeon-cages was one popular apprenticeship, and mending desks could be fun.

We could experiment with teacher-aides who are cheery ex-sergeant-majors with the voice and presence to monitor highly structured "Dragon Classes" that students could choose to be in on days they felt disruptive. I bet it could be popular with quite a few boys when they are reacting badly to perceived "sissiness" of kindly teachers.

Gardens in Schools is a great movement. All young people respond well to beautiful grounds, and this is one of the great psychological advantages of many private schools. Children who have personal interests in their gardens learn to hate vandalism as well as learning resilience when it happens.

Community working parties to help with maintenance can include the children themselves. Disadvantaged children with not much academic natural ability often flourish when they can learn and show manual and trade skills.

Children with no roots or sense of belonging need schools which can provide some. This feeling is fostered by entrance halls and corridors that celebrate former students of the school implicitly saying: "See what you too can do". No school should be designed like a factory, with no child-friendliness anywhere, and no main building and entrance that proclaim, "We think schooling and these children are important".

Furthermore, students need more care to preserve the best work they do, and be able to revisit the work they have been taught. Leaving each year with a "book" of what they have done and learned, and finally leaving school with a record like that as a "citizen's handbook" could help prevent the common amnesia for all school learning, and we might not need so many ephemeral "social" TV campaigns.

The privileged private schools in leafy suburbs should be twinning, and sharing resources and experiences with schools in dusty streets that are at the bottom for students' progress and adult outcomes.

These are some of the community aspects of getting rid of educational disadvantage. Two other requirements, however, are about the questions of:

- why do children arrive at school already disadvantaged? How can this be stopped? and
- what goes on in different classrooms so that it can be potluck whether a pupils learns to hate learning, or to love it?

In all three areas of a disadvantaged child's life, there is so much that could be done - 500 disadvantaged children could have a better chance for the cost of one Olympic athlete.

This change requires being ready to accompany all moaning and whingeing, and all dignified levels of discourse, with practical nitty gritty and openness to trialling innovations.

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