

*Making a Difference:
Building on young people's
perspectives of economic adversity*

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Report Launch 9 August 2012

Problems and commitments

The problem:

14% of Australian children are living in households that receive < 50% of median income.

Government commitment:

- Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008),
 - emphasise an aspiration towards equality of opportunity – that a child’s background (including culture, disability, socio-economic status and remoteness) should not influence his/her achievements
 - highlight the importance of adopting a perspective that recognises the whole child, “across cognitive, learning, physical, social, emotional and cultural dimensions” (COAG, 2009, p.4)

Australian Government Social Inclusion Principles

To be socially included, people must be given the opportunity to:

- secure a job;
- access services;
- connect with family, friends, work, personal interests and local community;
- deal with personal crisis; and
- have their voice heard.

Young people's perspectives

- school
 - (costs, teaching and learning, relationships with teachers, parent relationships with school, relationships with peers),
- neighbourhood
 - (activities they knew about and those they did not, costs, peer communities, safety),
- family
 - (money, resources, space, dynamics),
- aspirations
 - (immediate and later for self and for own children).

'The Rigmaster'

Key features of context

- Changing households and family formation
- Area of socio-economic mix
- Lives near strong labour market
- Lives near many opportunity structures for young people

Key events

- Father loses job
- Parents separated
- Family is dependent on NGO's
- Father regains employment and establishes safe stable home
- Rigmaster gets job
- Joins Karate club
- Saves for education
- Friend suicides

Nathaniel

Key features of Context

- Stable jobless household and extended family
- Area of socio-economic concentration
- Lives far from strong labour market
- Neighbourhood has few opportunity structures

Key events

- Nathaniel belongs in a crew
- Neighbourhood violence increases
- The 'crew' disengage from learning
- Nathaniel disengages from 'crew' but remains disengaged from learning

Diverse family complexities

- Many young people had complex financial arrangements in their families and others had frequent shortfalls that accumulated negative effects
- More stable families typically engaged in intra-familial transfers which buffered them from the stresses of unanticipated costs
- Fragmented families had no buffers and this lead to high geographic and housing mobility.

Educational disadvantage

Most study participants

- considered education and employment a route out of poverty.
- could only engage in schooling when their other basic needs for security were met.

However, when they could engage,

- learning impacted positively on young people's wellbeing as well as educational outcomes.

Learning and well-being

We do sex education - all the stuff, contraception. Some of the girls in the class don't even know, like, what happens. Like, [the teacher] was just explaining, and one of the girls was like, 'Oh, it's probably easy if you get drunk. You can put a condom on and stuff'. But the teacher went and got these drunk glasses, and then made us walk around the room, and then jump and all this stuff. Then she got out the condom and said, 'Now put this on the banana'. And it was just like this [mimics the action] ... like we couldn't do it. And then one of the girls couldn't even open the packet. So she's explained why you shouldn't go out drunk ... this is how unsafe sex happens, and it was pretty good lesson, I thought.

Investing in education

- **Schooling choice**
- *“It costs a lot to actually learn there... [I’m] going to get a good job. [I’m] not going to let different schools stop me’.*
Tahlia (female, 14 years, NSW)
- *I wouldn’t want to ask because I feel sorry for them (Tessa, female, 15 years, NSW, on asking her parents for money)*
- Over time young people engaged in learning that they were not passionate about

Investing in education

- Requires faith that investments in education ‘pay off’
- Requires attention to intergenerational experiences of blocked opportunities within families and communities
- Some places are characterized by local narratives that education works and some by narratives that education does not work for ‘people round here’
- Means understanding that schooling opportunities are shaped by the dynamics and opportunity structures of place

Building faith in education

I've had generations before me like my dad and all that they used to go there... like they know our family in that way so like from them knowing my family they're all nice. They're 'oh you're that boys son' and all that. I like that feeling when they say these things. It feels good when they say that. (Leroy, 14 years)

- I don't so much do meetings, just if I need to talk to a school about something, I will just ring them up and just have a chat or if they need to tell me something that has happened to the kids at school, they will ring me....and I can help them out (Carol, parent)*

“Schools just not a big issue”:

“A lot of the kids at my school just have enough and end up leaving because the same people aren’t equal (Kayla, 16)”

“I don’t want to go back to school, I just want to keep studying, but not in school (Linux, 18) “

- Lack of recognition of circumstances outside of schooling,
- Safety – lack of access to the resources and amenities that allow development of safe relationships

Schools need to interact positively with life outside

Schools do not stand alone

- ‘Issues cannot be left at the gate’;
- Local infrastructure and services provided by councils, state and federal governments shape the local dynamics which impact on young people’s learning;
- Young people wanted more than targeted welfare services – they wanted to participate with other young people on an equal footing;
- This requires adequate **opportunity structures** for young people in disadvantaged areas

Location really matters

Areas of Concentrated disadvantage with very limited opportunity structures

- High levels of stigma
- Stigma associated with place not with person
- Sense of belonging
- Narrow knowledge and horizons.

Areas of Socio-economic mix with availability of opportunity structures

- High levels of stigma
- Stigma is experienced personally
- Sense of isolation
- Broader knowledge of possibilities-but are they seen as achievable?

What should governments do?

Responses were clear and very consistent across the study

- Families need to have more money to better support their children and to be stable
- Environments (home, schools and neighbourhoods) need to be safer and to provide better quality activities and resources for young people – “on an **equal** footing”
- Interesting things at school should be free and readily available and the institutional cultures of schools should be responsive to complex family circumstances

The Rigmaster's resources

- Adequate family income (most of the time)
- An area well resourced with key opportunity structures for young people
- A critical mass of young people with faith in education
- A joined up and well resourced local service system

Nathaniel's resources

- Less than adequate income
- Inadequate opportunity structures for young people
- Few peers with faith in education
- Fragmented and under-resourced local service system

Conclusion

- Importance of listening to young people;
- Income inadequacy must be addressed in jobless, unemployed and insecurely employed families;
- Place-based responses are critical, as are;
- Well maintained and resourced local environments, secure affordable housing, integrated educational provision, infrastructure that connects people to strong labour markets
- **Systemic focus on well-being in the present as well as in the future.**

Acknowledgements

- MaD is funded by ARC linkage program (LP0882352) in partnership with The Smith Family, Mission Australia, the Association of Child Welfare Agencies, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the Social Inclusion Unit of the Government of South Australia, the Department of Education and Children Services (S.A), the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.
- CIs Peter Saunders, Bettina Cass and Gerry Redmond, with project manager Jen Skattebol and researcher Megan Bedford; PI's Anne Hampshire, Janet Taylor, Tess Ridge
- We are very grateful to the young people who participated in the study.
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