The shared work of learning: Lifting educational achievement through collaboration.
An agenda for systemic change

Tom Bentley and Ciannon Cazaly
The problem

Too many young people in Australia are starting behind in their education and staying behind, and too many are disengaging from school. Overall, student achievement in Australia is not improving. The gaps between high-achieving and low-achieving students and between well-off and disadvantaged students are too wide. Meanwhile, emphasis on educational improvement intensifies, as it has done for the last two decades. The pressure to improve learning outcomes in ways that are faster, cheaper and more sustainable continues to grow.

Amidst this pressure, focus on the individual school as the unit of effectiveness continues to sharpen. There is also growing attention to the needs and progress of each student, to the impact of teaching on student outcomes, and to the influence of relationships within and beyond the school.

Yet, while the quality of teaching and learning has improved in many schools, it is not improving enough to counteract the effects of systemic inertia, fragmentation, and growing social and economic inequality. This creates entrenched inequality of educational outcomes and opportunities, which are further exacerbated by economic and spatial trends. As a consequence, there is a mismatch between the learning needs of students and schools, and the current capabilities of education systems.

In this paper we explain the findings of a research project exploring high-impact learning systems in three Australian jurisdictions: South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. We examine the role of collaboration in lifting student achievement and overcoming community disadvantage, and set out an agenda for systemic change, based on using collaboration to achieve impact at scale.
In Australia there have been some modest gains that demonstrate the potential for improvement. Overall, the story is not good (Masters, 2014a). Australia’s performance since the introduction of NAPLAN has changed marginally. The 2015 NAPLAN results confirm moderate improvements in reading for Years 3 and 5 and in numeracy at Year 5 since 2008, but almost no change in Years 7 or 9, and no annual improvement in recent years (ACARA, 2013). Australia has gone backwards in PISA tests; reading literacy and mathematical literacy have declined significantly, and scientific literacy remained unchanged between 2003 and 2012 (Thomson et al, 2013).¹

The 2009 ABS Survey of Education and Training (SET) showed that Year 12 attainment of young people (20–24 years) rose from 70 per cent to 75 per cent between 2001 and 2009. However, for those living in the most disadvantaged areas it fluctuated between 50 per cent and 60 per cent.²

Meanwhile, the Victorian real estate industry reports that houses within the catchment of ‘good’ schools attract a price premium of 10–15 per cent (Cogden, 2014; Power, 2015). Academic research in the ACT found that a 5 per cent increase in school test scores is associated with a 3.5 per cent increase in house prices (Davidoff and Leigh, 2007).

Increasingly, differences in the wealth and background of students at different schools also magnify inequalities in their resourcing. For example, compare the voluntary fundraising experience of two neighbouring primary schools in Melbourne. At Clifton Hill Primary School, the My School website shows that 77 per cent of students come from families in the best-off quarter of the Australian population. This school raised more than $108,000 at its 2014 fete.⁴ Just 1.1km south of Gold Street is St Joseph’s Catholic Primary School. The My School website shows that 70 per cent of St Joseph’s students come from families in the lowest quarter of socioeconomic advantage. They held a fete and made $14.36 profit.

NATSEM¹ analysis shows that between 2003–04 and 2009–10 average family spending on preschool/primary education increased by 79 per cent, and average family spending on secondary education increased by 101 per cent (NATSEM, 2012). Poorer families just cannot keep up. Yet the increases in private spending are not leading to improvements in overall outcomes.

Analysis of Australian 2003 and 2006 PISA results confirms that the mean socioeconomic status (SES) of schools is strongly associated with academic outcomes, regardless of the individual SES of a student: the higher the mean SES of a school, the higher the level of academic attainment (Perry and McConney, 2010).

ABS data shows that young people aged 20–24 are more likely to have attained Year 12 if both their parents or guardians had attained Year 12 (90 per cent), compared with one or neither parent or guardian having attained Year 12 (78 per cent and 68 per cent respectively) (ABS, 2011). The pattern of inequality continues into higher education. Only 19 per cent of young people (20–25) in the most disadvantaged areas of Australia had attained or were working towards a bachelor or higher qualification, compared to 54 per cent among the least disadvantaged areas (ABS, 2009). Of all university students, only 11.9 per cent are from a low socioeconomic background (DET, 2014).
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About the Authors

Tom Bentley is a writer and policy adviser based in Melbourne. From 2007–13 he was Deputy Chief of Staff and senior policy adviser to Julia Gillard, Prime Minister of Australia 2010–13 and Education Minister 2007–2010. His policy work included school curriculum, teaching, funding and transparency reforms, industry and innovation policy, the Tasmanian forestry agreement and the *Australia in the Asian Century* white paper.

From 1999–2006 he was Director of Demos, an independent think tank based in London. He is a former special adviser to David Blunkett MP, Secretary of State for Education and Employment in the UK. He works with institutions around the world on how to learn more effectively, including as an adviser to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and as principal policy adviser at RMIT University.


Dr Ciannon Cazaly is a social policy researcher and adviser. She has contributed to research projects and policy analysis within the fields of teaching and learning, higher education, sport and culture, and Australian politics.

About the Paper

The authors argue that too many young people in Australia are starting behind in their education, staying behind, and disengaging from school. Overall, student achievement in Australia is not improving and the gaps between high and low achieving students, and between well-off and disadvantaged students, are too wide. Using examples of how some schools are making improvements, the authors explain the findings of a research project that explored high-impact local learning systems in three Australian jurisdictions: South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. In particular, they examine the evidence that collaboration plays an important role in lifting student achievement and overcoming community disadvantage. They offer recommendations and set out an agenda for systemic change, using collaboration to achieve impact at scale.