

Submission to the Inquiry into the effect of reduced Commonwealth funding for the state and territory provided schools

From: **Misty Adoniou**. Associate Professor in Language and Literacy. Faculty of Education, Science, Technology and Mathematics University of Canberra

My input to the Committee focuses on those who underachieve in our schools, why they underachieve and the impact of reduced funding on these learners.

Equity in education in Australia

Australia's results in international tests and in our own home grown testing reveal the most unsavoury of educational gaps. We are a country defined as 'high quality, but low equity' in education. That means we produce high achievers, but the gap between those who achieve at school and those who don't is one of the highest amongst OECD countries.

This is not a new phenomenon - it has been a key feature of our PISA test results since we joined that particular international testing club in 2000. In fact, the equity gap is increasing. 14.2 % of students at level 1 or below in 2010, compared with about 13 % in 2000 (PISA). One proficiency level is about the equivalent of three years schooling - so we are talking about some very large gaps.

Our appalling record of equity in education in Australia has once again been confirmed in the latest Closing the Gap report on conditions for Australia's indigenous peoples.

In fact, when we interrogate who underachieves in Australian schools we can identify the following groups: those who speak English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI), those with a disability and those from low SES backgrounds. It is not by coincidence then that these are also the categories of the additional student resource loadings that were defined by the original Gonski report and designated in the original Labor response to Gonski in their Better Schools – A National Plan for School Improvement.

In practice, these additional student loadings have yet to be delivered in the manner in which Gonski recommended – attached to student need. In fact, the federal government has yet to even come up with a way of identifying which students would be eligible for the English Language Proficiency loading.

With the proposed cuts to education funding, the likelihood of any money reaching the students in our long tail of educational underachievement is even more compromised.

Is money everything or anything in meeting the needs of our underachieving students?

There are those who argue that the millions spent trying to close the gap unsuccessfully is proof that money isn't the answer to Australia's educational woes. They are wrong. Education costs money.

Our lack of success in closing the gap is evidence that we have misdirected the money. This is because **systems misdirect their school funding through a fundamental misunderstanding of student needs.**

Many principals – and systems – make the mistake of assuming that ‘good teaching’ will meet the needs of their underachieving students and they focus their staffing and their direct their funds to generic professional learning for teachers, rather than the specific needs of targeted students.

For example, to achieve in any area of schooling you need to have an excellent command of written and spoken Australian Standard English. By definition, EALD learners do not have this. Many ATSI learners don’t have it either, as many speak Aboriginal English. Indeed, many low SES students don’t have standard Australian English (e.g. I done it yesterday, I been there , I seen yous etc).

When funding is delivered at a school or system level, Principals are left with the responsibility to distribute the funds so they meet the needs of learners in their schools. In schools where Principals have some autonomy over their staffing points, there is ample evidence from the profession that funds for EALD learners are funneled into general literacy programmes – following the logic that good literacy programmes will benefit all learners, including EALD learners. This is not the case. Indeed some schools use funding to reduce class sizes. This may provide some benefits to the school in general – but in no way addresses the EALD students specific language learning needs. In a recent survey of EALD teachers, one teacher described the circumstances in her school

‘The common use of EALD teachers as group work teachers to make smaller maths or literacy groups for mainstream classes often leads to the EALD teacher not working with the students most in need and not giving them specific EALD support. Some teachers have been given groups purely for behaviour management, groups without EALD students etc. It is often the EALD teacher who becomes the relief teacher when mainstream teachers are absent.’

In some schools EALD and “Learning Assistance” students (also known as “special needs” students) are being combined into one learning group. Placing these students, whose learning needs are quite distinct, in an undifferentiated “remedial” group means that neither the EALD student nor the student with learning disability get the instruction they need.

The result is that struggling students are not given the specialist support they require.

What should the money be spent on?

Multiple surveys have found that teachers and Principals feel least confident with EALD students, ATSI students and students with special needs - precisely the students who are failing.

Teaching is most effective when we establish what students know and do and build upon that. However, very few teachers or Principals in Australia are trained in second or additional language acquisition and so they find it very challenging to plan effective learning for EALD students and ATSI students. Most mainstream teachers are native

English speakers, and usually monolingual, so the system behind the English language is ‘invisible’ to them – making it very hard for them to teach Standard Australian English explicitly to their students. Similarly, they are limited in their understandings of how to meet the needs of special needs students. ‘Good teaching’ isn’t good enough.

Qualified, knowledgeable and committed EALD and special needs teachers are fundamental to the effective delivery of EALD tuition and other learning support. Therefore money should be spent primarily on the professional learning of teachers, both preservice and inservice, and the delivery and evaluation of evidence-based programs targeted directly at the students with the identified needs.

Conclusion

Education costs money, but the money must be wisely spent. If Australia is to truly provide equality of educational opportunity to its population, a student-based funding model is required, where the funding is attached to the identified students and the schools are directly accountable for the learning outcomes of those identified students. This would ensure the money was being spent where the money is intended, and not diffused and funneled elsewhere.

About a third of our students in Australia speak English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD). In some schools, in urban Sydney and Melbourne and remote indigenous communities in Queensland, NT and Western Australia, 100% of the school population is EALD students. The proportion of EALD students in our schools is growing – not declining.

Cognitively, these learners are the most advantaged in our schools. They are bilingual. Bilingual brains are more flexible, more creative, and better at problem solving. However, the potential of many of these clever children is squandered – and schools and educational bureaucracies must bear much of the responsibility for this waste.

Many of these EALD students, particularly indigenous children and children from refugee backgrounds, occupy Australia’s long tail of underachievement which is bleakly obvious in our national NAPLAN results as well as in the international PISA results. These students are often operating at a level two to three years below their peers.

And it has been this way for decades. We have NEVER done this well. Unless we attach funding directly to those who have the identified needs, and demand accountability for their subsequent achievement, nothing will change and Australia will continue to top the league tables as the world’s most inequitable education system.

Misty Adoniou PhD, MEd (Hons), BEd, Dip.Teaching
Associate Professor
Faculty of ESTEM
University of Canberra