Social inclusion, learning and young people

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If our paramount interest is in the lives people can lead . . . then it cannot but be a mistake to concentrate exclusively only on one or other of the means to such freedom. We must look at impoverished lives, and not just at depleted wallets. (Sen 2000, p.3 original emphasis)

Federal Labor has positioned education and training as central to the achievement of social inclusion and acknowledges the contribution that young people can make to a prosperous Australia given a real opportunity to complete 12 years of education and to move on to further education and training and employment (Gillard & Wong 2007). After years of neglect and the absence of a national plan of action for disadvantaged youth, the social inclusion agenda offers a significant opportunity for cooperative approaches that bring together governments, non-government agencies, service providers, community stakeholders and researchers in the arena of school to work transition. This cooperative approach is welcomed by the Brotherhood in that it suggests an alignment with our understanding that social exclusion — what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as poor skills, low incomes, unemployment — constructs disadvantage (Social Exclusion Unit 1997). A commitment to the social inclusion of young people requires multi-dimensional responses that consider factors such as health, wellbeing and housing within a school to work transition framework.

The National Reform Agenda, human capital and social inclusion

Over the last decade there have been a range of policy responses at all levels of Australian government to enhance the opportunities for young people to make a successful transition from school to independence in uncertain times. At a commonwealth level these will be framed by a new National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA National Goals Project 2008). The commitment of all Australian governments in 2006 to a National Reform Agenda (NRA) had already provided the opportunity for the range of state initiatives to be released. In the Victorian context these include A Fairer Victoria which, whilst not badged as such, clearly focuses on a social inclusion agenda (Department of Premier & Cabinet 2005).

The National Reform Agenda was developed in recognition of the risks associated with the increasing competitiveness of the global economy at a time when Australia’s population is ageing. The NRA includes competition reform, regulation reform, and human capital reform. The focus of human capital reform is the improvement of health, learning and work outcomes for all Australians. In a context of skill shortages, an ageing population and a highly competitive, globalised economy, the participation of all who are potential workers, including those who are most disengaged from, or marginally attached to, the labour market, is vital.

The focus on human capital as an organising concept echoes directions in the international policy arena. However, it has not gone without critique:
Despite the obvious attractions of human capital thinking . . . we have a number of difficulties with this calculative, instrumental, abstract and generalized conception of learning. It seems to fail to recognize the complex interactional, intellectual and situated processes that constitute learning; it is socially disembedded. (Ball, Maguire & Macrae 2000, p.9)

While studies of inclusion almost always include a material dimension (Daly & Silver 2008) the concept of ‘human capital’ is, in many circles, unwelcome given its tendency to focus on people only as workers. However, on closer examination the human capital discourse within the National Reform Agenda does suggest opportunity to pursue a socially-embedded approach within this focus. In it, we see, in principle at least, a commitment to consider the importance not only of health but also of skills and qualifications for ‘life and learning’ including those necessary to ‘enjoy active and productive working lives’ in ways that are consistent with ‘the long-term interests of the individual’ (Council of Australian Governments 2006, p.5) From the Brotherhood’s perspective, social and economic aspects are interdependent and involve the building of personal capacities and material resources in order to fulfil one’s potential for economic and social participation and, in turn, a life of common dignity (Nicholson 2008).

The breadth of outcomes sought demonstrates the potential for an approach to human capital that integrates health and wellbeing. This accords with the commitment to social inclusion that has become the dominant policy discourse since the election of the Rudd Government in 2007. However, a commitment to social inclusion has implications for government itself. The example of the Irish National Anti Poverty Strategy with its focus on targeted outcomes for social inclusion and a desire to change governance process indicates the failure of government to implement either targets or reforms sufficient to deliver on its policy agenda (Adshead & McInerney 2006). It is imperative that an Australian social inclusion agenda be more than policy rhetoric given the challenging context faced by young people.

A changing context for youth

The experiences of young people growing up today in Australia have changed. Increasing use of the technology for communication and leisure is often a fundamental part of their material world. Post-compulsory education and training is no longer the experience of the few: young people today are, as a group, more highly educated than ever before. They are also active consumers as increasingly, they are already working while still involved in full-time study. In part this reflects a buoyant casual labour market for young people given unemployment in Australia has been at record lows. Yet the precariousness of that labour market means that although they are working, they often remain dependent on family well beyond their teenage years. These young people seem to have absorbed the neo-liberal focus on individualising as they demonstrate a strong sense of autonomy and a concern with the project of the self (Wyn et al. 2008).
This context is also one of increased social polarisation (Vinson 2007). Access to social support, community engagement and sustainable employment opportunities are not equally available to all young people. In moving from school to work in a precarious youth labour market this point is particularly significant given research indicates young people in Australia most often find jobs through informal channels (Dockery & Strathdee 2003) and experience civic benefits through community engagement (Colorado State Board of Education 2004). For those who lack social and cultural capital, profoundly evidenced by the experience of new migrants and refugees, there are more risks than opportunities in this changing context.

A significant trend has been the increase in part-time work taken up by young people including those in full-time study (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005). Whilst those in part-time work are not as marginalised as those unemployed, there is some evidence that this group are not on a trajectory to full-time work and increased income levels in the longer term (Lamb & McKenzie 2001). Many would prefer to be full-time or work longer hours (Marks 2006). For many young people living in locations with relatively low entry-level job growth, gaining even a tentative foothold towards sustainable work by way of part-time work is difficult given they are competing with their adult peers (NSW Teachers Federation 2007). Given labour market experience of full-time work has a large positive impact on subsequent labour market outcomes (Marks, Hillman & Beavis 2003) there is for these young people an increased likelihood of being caught in a cycle of low-paid intermittent work interspersed with spells out of work and on income support payments (Masterman-Smith & Pocock forthcoming 2008).

The array of data on young people’s progress in the transition from school to work show that whilst in aggregate some key indicators have been improving, a significant proportion either disengage from active participation in learning or fail to achieve skills levels that enable a smooth entry into sustainable work. Over the past decades the proportion of young people not fully engaged in education or work has declined, with most of this trend explained by the increased school retention rate and progression to post compulsory training options. However, while 46 per cent of young adults from high socio-economic status backgrounds engage in full-time education, less than one-fifth of young Australians do so from low socio-economic status backgrounds. One in eight is neither engaged in full-time education nor in full-time work (Foundation for Young Australians 2008). In their 2007 election manifesto, Australian Labor declared a teenage unemployment rate of 18.5 per cent in Australia, with a rate of over 20% in four out of ten regions (Gillard & Wong 2007). Demand for low-skilled labour has declined both in Australia and overseas—nearly three-quarters of new jobs in the period 1990–2003 were taken up by university graduates. Only one in eight of the jobs went to job seekers without post-school qualifications (Kelly, Bolton & Harding 2005).
In parallel with these shifts, the provision of public services has also changed with increased emphasis placed on customer choice and empowerment in an increasingly user-pays funding structure. Whilst a more competitive environment may well serve to increase efficiencies and performance across the range of social services, this approach places greater responsibility on individuals and families to manage risk and opportunity.

Many young people contend with poor physical or mental health (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2007), substance abuse issues (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2007), homelessness (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008), criminal assault (Boese & Scutella 2006) family breakdown and so on. While there is a generalised concern about the lack of civic engagement of young people (Torney-Purta et al. 2001), young people are also denied basic rights to participate in decision-making, to receive equal pay, to move freely through public spaces and to participate fully in political life (Bessant 2007).

This overview draws attention to the need to establish key indicators to benchmark progress. In the Irish context, a system of ‘policy-proofing’ was pursued. That involved all underpinning documentation for major policy decisions including information on the impact of proposals on groups in, or at risk of, social exclusion (Adshead & McInerney 2006). At the same time, the European Youth Pact (Commission of the European Communities 2005) focuses on social inclusion of youth and promotion of active citizenship. Its three strands for social inclusion suggest the kind of measures that could be adopted: employment, integration and social advancement; education, training and mobility; and reconciliation of family life and working life. In our preliminary work, the Brotherhood considers that indicators would need to be arranged around broad areas of resources—material resources including dimensions such as economic engagement, secure housing and good health, skills and social resources—and participation including social and civic participation.

**Re-imaging school to work transition in the context of social inclusion**

What does youth transition look like in a socially inclusive Australia? In Victoria there are a range of diverse initiatives that respond to young people’s risk of disengagement with school or assist with progression beyond it. These are managed by a variety of government departments and often have a narrow focus based on eligibility, scope and objectives. We have also seen a growth in community managed support services such as learning support programs that assist with engagement through bolstering success. While education is often presented as empowering to all young people, as something that has ‘the potential to lead somewhere,’ the reality is that some young people simply do not have the cultural capital required to support the accepted level of commitment required to succeed in post compulsory education (Hattam & Smyth 2003). In Australia, in common with other contexts, policies that have focused on only one dimension of social exclusion—the push to increase school
retention—have risked exacerbating social exclusion through ensuring some young people no longer have any sustainable labour market opportunities for which they can compete, as even the most unskilled points of entry to the labour market now require credentials (Collins, Kenway & McLeod 2000).

The degree of turbulence associated with the transition from school to work is related to present and future patterns of social inclusion. At the most basic level for many the simple costs of education are a barrier. Research by the Brotherhood indicates that despite the rhetoric, education in Australia is not truly free (Bond & Horn 2007). While it is generally accepted that poverty and disadvantage influence educational outcomes, and that these in turn affect post-school pathways, the strength of the relationship is influenced by a range of family, community and social factors (West 2007). Home factors can, and do, mediate the influence of socio-economic status on educational outcomes, for instance some first generation immigrant parents see education as a means to social mobility despite their own low level of education, occupational status and income (Considine & Zappala 2002). This indicates the possibilities for operationalising the social inclusion agenda if a truly multi-dimensional approach is adopted.

Acknowledgement of the factors leading to social exclusion of young people should be a prerequisite for developing the new raft of policy reforms that take into full account the complex social contexts faced by young people and their parents, and the specific challenges disadvantaged youth encounter. Operationalising the social inclusion agenda demands proactive approaches to providing better integrated education and support that recognises complexity and both supports and empowers young Victorians in participating in school and society. It also requires valuing a more flexible approach to learning both within and beyond schools that ensure meaningful engagement and participation consistent with individual capabilities and aspirations.

If we take the Victorian policy of Managed Individual Pathways as an example, we can explore what this might look like. In Victoria, the Managed Individual Pathways (MIP) initiative ensures that all students 15 years and over in government schools are provided with individual pathway plans with associated support as a means to continued education, training or full-time employment. MIP provides for ‘additional support’ to students at risk of disengaging or not making a successful transition to further education, training or secure employment (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2006).

The social inclusion focus would suggest that MIP would be available in all educational settings and would be developed well before the later years of school. It would travel with a young person at the commencement of and through their learning journey, regardless of the context of learning. Further, it would encompass not only those aspects of support directly related to schools (for instance, learning support
programs or careers advice) but also those aspects of economic and social support required to ‘not live impoverished lives’ (Sen 2000).

A more holistic and proactive model would include a focus on providing families with the resources and capabilities to ensure the success of their children in entering, moving through and beyond the education system. It would include information on health and wellbeing, and the development of a healthy learner identity. It would equally value the range of pathways available to young people and contribute to their understanding of how those pathways can be combined in ways that meet the needs and interests of the young person. It would include access to regular, quality, structured workplace learning as an integrated component of the curriculum. It would acknowledge the burden carried by young people in balancing work and study commitments, as well as family commitments, and would accommodate these pressures in curriculum planning.

At the point of transition beyond school, there would be a continuity of support with the young person including a focus on secure accommodation and adequacy of income. It would continue to frame support needs through the first year post-school whether in employment, further education, or some combination of both - such as apprenticeship. It would address issues around access to transport, identification of mentors and networks, and other opportunities that would enrich life and ensure well-being.

The socially-inclusive model has implications for school organisation as it demands access to a dedicated management stream focused specifically on ensuring every student’s individual development and fostering student resilience. This management stream would have responsibility for a specific team of staff focused on the students’ individual development and wellbeing, which would involve agencies and community groups outside the school as core team members. It also has implications for teacher professional development, both pre-service and in-service given a need to work in partnership, with young people, their families and communities, and often outside the ‘walls’ of the classroom, the school and the education system itself.

In their social inclusion agenda, the federal government acknowledges the need for a new way of governing (Gillard & Wong 2007). A realisation of the commitment to enhanced intergovernmental collaboration—across levels and portfolios of government— is a necessary first step that will enable other stakeholders, including parents, communities and business, to contribute to social inclusion for all young people. In particular, there is a compelling need, as a priority in the post-compulsory years, for new funding and accountability arrangements that align with current policy objectives. This may demand the development of bipartisan agreements that enable a long-term, sustainable view that is not constrained by politically expedient time spans (Alford 2002).
As we move to demand-led provision of education and learning, with stronger participation of employers in framing priorities for skills development at a local level, there is a need to have adequate drivers and incentives on portfolios that will mainstream the social inclusion imperative. As we have seen with the focus of training on up-skilling for increased productivity, there will continue to be young people who cannot participate given insufficient foundational skills, social or cultural capital, or health and well-being circumstances. One of the critical questions is therefore what type of governance arrangements and resources are needed to turn into reality the aspiration that no young person will be left out.

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