



Commissioner for Children and Young People
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National Education Evidence Base
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Productivity Commission Inquiry into National Education Evidence Base

As Commissioner for Children and Young People in Western Australia, my role is to advocate for more than 585,000 Western Australian children and young people under the age of 18, including promoting and monitoring their wellbeing. Under the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* I am required to give priority to, and have special regard for, the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and to children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

The work of the Commissioner is underpinned by a reliance on the best available evidence, consultations with children and young people, and engagement with stakeholders. In the context of the above I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into National Education Evidence Base.

Objectives and framework

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children have the right to access a good quality education¹. The inquiry presents an important opportunity to consider how data can be used to best support the education of children and young people across Australia.

As noted in the Productivity Commission's Issue Paper (the Issue Paper), the way in which 'outcomes' are conceptualised and ultimately, measured, influences the kinds of education data that should be collected, and how such data should be used. Education is a right of all children and young people and, in aspiring to build a world-class education system, Australia should have an education system underpinned by equity, with a focus on prioritising those most vulnerable or disadvantaged. To improve educational outcomes for children and young people then is to reduce the gap between the highest and lowest performing students by increasing the baseline of the lowest performing students. Beyond educational outcomes, education has significant

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implications for wellbeing and is increasingly recognised as a key social determinant of health². Given that quality education contributes to a range of positive social outcomes a broad set of wellbeing outcomes should be considered for the national education evidence base. In particular, the Commission should consider a broad definition of outcomes, including non-academic outcomes such as health and wellbeing.

As part of my statutory responsibility to monitoring the wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia, my office established The Wellbeing Monitoring Framework to provide a single, collated resource for Western Australia to support an evidence-based approach. The Wellbeing Monitoring Framework comprises of two reports. *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People*³ provides a picture of how children and young people are faring according to 40 key measures of wellbeing and highlights areas where improved data collection systems could be introduced to provide a stronger evidence base. The five measures of wellbeing related directly to education in this report are: parents engaging children in informal learning, early education, children developmentally vulnerable on entering school, children achieving at or above national minimum standards, and pathways for leaving school. *Building Blocks: Best practice programs that improve the wellbeing of children and young people*⁴ describes 126 best practice and promising programs which have been demonstrated as having a positive impact on the wellbeing of children and young people. These companion reports were designed to be practical resources for those working with children and young people including information on what makes the program work and considerations for service providers.

Whilst noting that the inquiry is focussed on underlying data of the national education evidence base, rather than on education research literature (particularly with respect to analyses of 'what works' in teaching and learning in schools), consideration must be given to the translation from the national education evidence base to improved outcomes for children and young people. The questions in the Issue Paper, 'Do you agree that the objective of a national education evidence base should be to improve education outcomes? Are there other objectives that should be included?' are problematic in this regard. As noted in the Issue Paper, a sound evidence base is an essential component to monitor progress, evaluate policies and programs and inform decision making – the objective of the national education evidence base would be to provide this sound evidence base, rather than directly improving educational outcomes.

A further framework is required to support the use of the data captured in the national education evidence base to improve outcomes. The framework must ultimately support those working directly with children and young people to translate the data into strategies to improve educational outcomes. Improved coordination of data collection and access would decrease the demands on schools systems by users of such data. Similarly, a national education evidence base would promote a more coordinated approach to research and potentially increase the extent to which research informs policy. Comprehensive data must be collected to be able to provide meaningful insight into policy development and evaluations. For example, data that enables a holistic and nuanced understanding of student attendance is critical in informing policy responses (and understanding the impact of various policy interventions). Whilst attendance rates provide insight into broad patterns, the reasons that students are not in attendance enables targeted policy responses.

There is a distinction between data useful for effective policy development and evaluation and data that ought to be publicly available⁵. The Issue Paper acknowledges that the release of raw data may lead to its misinterpretation or misuse, and undermine the trust and confidence of individuals and organisations. Beyond misinterpretation and misuse, the range and type of data that are collected and made available can also contribute to an incomplete picture of the complexity of improving educational outcomes, particularly when data are provided in aggregate form. Transparency and access to knowledge are important aspects of a democratic society however data provided in the national education evidence base should not contribute to high-stakes, narrow forms of accountability or improvement. Protocols regarding the access and application or use of data must be formed in the best interests of children and young people and those who work with them and, as noted above, contribute to positively to improving outcomes informed by the broad purposes of schooling.

The Issue Paper notes the complexity of jurisdictional data comparability and implications for education research and policy. Whilst important factors, the way in which data is collected and reported to and about schools is also a key consideration. The national education evidence base should link data sets to enable traceability of children and young people's wellbeing over time, provide a more accurate understanding of 'value adding' that occurs in schools (see for example Doyle & Prout, 2012⁶), and enable schools to effectively support the children and young people in their care. Such information would enable resources to be allocated that engender more equitable outcomes for all children and young people.

Issues and opportunities

Voices of children and young people

The involvement of children and young people is an inevitable aspect of data creation and collection. Systems in place to collect data created by children and young people should not place undue stress on our youngest citizens – as noted in the study by Wyn et al. (2014) referred to in the Issue Paper. My role as Commissioner includes consulting with children and young people on a range of topics and education and school feature prominently across these consultations. In 2010, my office conducted research into what children and young people believed was important to their wellbeing⁷. A good education was one of eight things that children and young people said was important.

"Every kid in the state [should] go to school so they can get a better education and life" Boy, 16⁸

The Issue Paper highlights the importance of 'data-driven decision making' and I would add the importance of the views of children and young people to be included. Children and young people in the consultation about wellbeing expressed frustration with 'the way the school system is set up', of feeling like 'guinea pigs' and not being able to have input into what did or did not work in helping them learn.

"From a learning perspective we know what's not working but we can't do anything about it a lot of the time because it's above us to be able to do anything" Girl, 16⁹

More recently, over 1,200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people from across Western Australia participated in a consultation with my office about what was important to them. *"Listen To Us": Using the views of WA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to improve policy and service delivery*¹⁰, one of the resulting publications from the consultations, includes a range of suggestions from children and young people about enhancing their educational experience.

"[If I were boss of this town] I would include more opportunities and support for children who want to go to school but can't afford to buy basic school supplies..." 17 year-old Jabirr Jabirr young person (Kimberley)

"I know in school I'm not doing the best right now. I probably need some people to help me out with some extra things, like a tutor or something. It's one of the biggest things I'm struggling with right now. I definitely know that if I don't get stuck into my school work, I'm not going to go anywhere." 14 year-old girl (Perth)

"Some kids don't go to school because teachers snap at them. I'd have kinder teachers who understand what's going on." 13 year-old girl (Kimberley)

"... I would build a hostel for all the kids to go to when their parents are out of town so the kids can still attend school." Kariyarra child younger than 10 years (Pilbara)

"[If I were boss of this town I would make it so there was]...more learning language in school." 12 year-old Kariyarra young person (Gascoyne)

"Closely involve the Indigenous elders with the decision making of the local council and integrate their culture into the curriculum of the school." 17 year-old young person (Mid-West)

Despite their significant involvement in the education system the views of children and young people are considerably lacking. The literature review I recently commissioned, *Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school*¹¹, highlights a general absence of student experiences and voices on defining and addressing (dis)engagement with school, and the disjuncture between the views of children and young people and teachers/schools of the causes of disengagement. When consulted, children and young people generally identify three factors as most significant – relationships, both with friends and teachers, curriculum content and the way it is taught. Whilst there is no consensus among educators and policy makers, the research literature suggests that this group are much less likely to cite relationships as instrumental to the student engagement process.

Commencing in 2016, my office will consult with school-age children and young people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged, to obtain their views on factors that influence their engagement or disengagement from education. This information, alongside consultations with parents (discussed further below), will be used to advocate for policies and strategies that strengthen their engagement.

Children and young people are able to provide significant insight into education and strategies to support engagement. The disjuncture in views between children and young people and educators highlights the importance of including children and young people in issues that affect them. As such, in considering the data to be collected nationally the voices and experiences of children and young people are essential.

Voices of parents and community members

The *My School* website is positioned by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority as a tool to help parents analyse NAPLAN results and other information and encourage engagement with their children's school. The questions in Issue Paper, 'How do parents use the data provided on My School' and 'How has My School affected parents' engagement with schools?' are important considerations in understanding parental engagement with schools and the role of data in this relationship.

Whilst access to data such as that provided by My School may be useful for some families, for others cost prohibits internet access in the home¹². Furthermore, acting on the data provided through My School can be framed through consumer discourses of choice¹³, however for some families, particularly those most vulnerable or disadvantaged, a range of socio-demographic factors limit choice. Consideration must be given to what barriers may exist for parents in accessing and acting on data made available to them.

Parental engagement is associated with higher attendance and positive educational attainment¹⁴. However, parent voice is a notable gap in the literature about educational (dis)engagement. Consultation with parents to obtain their views on the factors that influence their child's engagement or disengagement from education will be included in the aforementioned project my office is undertaking this year.

Engagement as critical to improving educational outcomes

Attendance at school is an important influence on educational outcomes¹⁵, however it is important to note that attendance does not equate to engagement. The literature review commissioned by my office outlines that engagement is both a process and an outcome, is complex and can be influenced by multiple and varied factors. As such, collecting data and evaluating best practice principles for reducing the risk of disengagement is challenging. As Hancock and Zubrick¹⁶ note:

"Additional difficulties in evaluating 'what works' for preventing disengagement and re-engaging disengaged students are highlighted in comments in the 'Gonski' report on school funding (Gonski et al., 2011), where it is noted that an estimated \$4.4 billion was spent by governments on programs for disadvantaged students in 2009-10 (Rorris et al., 2011). As disadvantaged students are often at risk of disengagement indicators, it is likely some of this funding was intended to improve school engagement for at-risk students.

Yet despite this expenditure, a lack of nationally consistent data and evaluation approaches means there is little understanding about the effectiveness of the programs that the funding supports. Put simply, while many programs and initiatives may be implemented in relation to student

disengagement, few of them are evaluated, and fewer still evaluated well. As a result, it is hard to know what works, and equally as important, what does not work.”

Engagement with and whilst at school is critical for all children and young people and schools must be enabled to support engagement of all students. The national education evidence base must further understanding of engagement to improve educational outcomes, and in particular, support the evaluation of programs to increase the evidence-base for decisions regarding policy development, resource allocation and service delivery.

Scope

A child’s physical, social and psychological development from birth to eight years sets the foundation for their health and wellbeing from childhood through to adult life. Developmental outcomes vary according to the range of risk and protective factors a child is exposed to^{17 18}. Given the importance of early childhood the scope of the evidence base should include data on all children younger than 4 years old. Such data will be able to further inform policies, programs and services to support this critical time of childhood development.

Furthermore, the evidence base should include data on young people who have left school before completing Year 12 or who do not attend school for other reasons. The absence of data generated by and for children and young people regarding disengagement has been noted above. The perspectives of children and young people that have been captured are generally from two distinct groups – those who are still participating in school and those who have left school and are re-engaging through alternative education pathways¹⁹. Further data is required from children and young people who are not involved in the formal education system about their wellbeing.

Conclusion

An evidence-based approach is recognised as essential in the process of developing policies, programs and services that improve the wellbeing of children and young people. While the majority of Australia’s children and young people are doing well, there remains a significant and inexcusable gap between our lowest and highest performing students. Similarly the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason requires further sustained focus and attention.

The national education evidence base provides an important tool for informing the effective allocation of resources and support, and further developing an evidence-base to support the wellbeing of children and young people. The development and implementation however should not burden education and care systems, or the children and young people within them. Careful consideration must also be given to the components of the data within the national education evidence base, and how these contribute to policy frameworks and accountability regimes. Importantly, any use of the national education evidence base should be guided by protocols framed in the best interests of children and young people and in developing more socially just education and care systems. Data should not be inappropriately used to further political agendas or to promote narrow conceptualisations of outcomes and improvement of outcomes.

Finally, children and young people have a unique and important view point that is invaluable in understanding how best to support their involvement in education, and their views should be included in the national education evidence base.

Yours sincerely



COLIN PETTIT

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¹ United Nations 1989, Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner.

² The Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2013, *Australia's domestic response to the World Health Organization's (WHO) Commission on Social Determinants of Health report "Closing the gap within a generation"*, Commonwealth Government.

³ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

⁴ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2014, *Building Blocks: Best practice programs that improve the wellbeing of children and young people – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

⁵ Lingard B 2010, Policy borrowing, policy learning: Testing times in Australian schooling, *Critical Studies in Education*, 51(2), 129-147, DOI: 10.1080/17508481003731026

⁶ Doyle T & Prout 2 2012, Indigenous student mobility, performance and achievement: Issues of positioning and traceability. *International Journal of Education Research*, 54, 41-49, DOI: 10.1016/j.ijer.2011.12.002

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2010, *Children and Young People's Views on Wellbeing*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

¹⁰ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2015, *"Listen To Us": Using the views of WA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to improve policy and service delivery*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

¹¹ Hancock K & Zubrick S 2015, *Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016, *Household Use of Information Technology, Australia 2014-15*, cat. no. 8146.0, <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/8146.0>>

¹³ Rowe E & Windle J 2012, The Australian middle class and education: A small-scale study of the school choice experience as framed by 'my school' within inner city families. *Critical Studies in Education*, 53(2), 137, DOI:10.1080/17508487.2012.672327

¹⁴ Hancock KJ et al 2013, *Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts*. Report for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

¹⁵ Hancock K, Shepherd C, Lawrence D & Zubrick S 2013, *Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts*. Australian Government Department of Education.

¹⁶ Hancock K & Zubrick S 2015, *Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

¹⁷ Moore, T. 2014, *Understanding the nature and significance of early childhood: New evidence and its implications*, Centre for Community Child Health, Presentation at Centre for Community Child Health seminar, Investing in Early Childhood – the future of early childhood education and care in Australia, The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, 25 July 2014.

¹⁸ National Research Council Institute of Medicine 2000, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, eds JP Shonkoff & D Phillips, National Academy Press.

¹⁹ Hancock K & Zubrick S 2015, *Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.