

The socioeconomic factor as the driving force of disadvantage in Australian educa...

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The problem of equity in education in Australia has been a burning topic for many years. Scientists are concerned with a variety of questions on equity, including the major factors of disadvantage in schools and universities, and the chief one among them is the socioeconomic factor. Before turning to a discussion of why the socioeconomic factor of disadvantage in education is so crucial to resolving, let us first deal with the question of the difference of equity and equality. As the Merriam-Webster Dictionary suggests, “equal” is something that regards or affects all objects in the same way.

The meaning of “equitable” becomes confusing because it means that something “deals fairly and equally with all concerned”. So does it mean that “equality” and “equity” are basically synonyms? Turning to the word “fair” in the same dictionary, it can be observed that it is something “marked with impartiality and honesty; free from self-interest, prejudice, or favoritism”. Turning back to the meaning of “equal” it can be clearly seen that dictionary definitions show little difference in these words’ meanings. Coming back to the previous question, whether “equality” and “equity” can be interchangeable needs to be defined. In some cases, they can. Nonetheless, “equality” has a much broader meaning, while “equity” is more specific. This specificity, as it seems, is not yet fixed in the dictionaries or, at least, not too clearly.

According to Audra Baleisis, “Equality is about sameness – everyone gets the same treatment. Equity is about fairness – each person gets what she or he needs to succeed” (2017). With that quote, she also presents us with a small picture where an examiner presents different animals with one and the

same task: climb a tree. In this exam, the bird and the monkey have a clear advantage over other animals: the penguin, the elephant, the fish, the seal, and the dog. So, coming from this we understand that reaching equity is far more important than reaching equality – which is at its peak today. We should give people who are in disadvantage a bit more to allow them to be as successful as their capacity allows them to be. Having solved the question of equity and equality, let us find out why the question of socioeconomic disadvantage is so sharp in Australia. To do that, we used the report of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) based on their Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The program measured the success of 15-year-olds based on their scientific, reading and mathematical literacy. The significance of this report is not only that it is conducted every three years in Australia, but also in many other countries, which allows us to compare the results both synchronically and diachronically.

The research is very expansive and touches many aspects of education in Australia. For the matter of this paper, however, we will only assess the difference in scientific literacy between the higher and lower socioeconomic groups as results of scientific literacy are quite similar to those of reading and mathematical literacy. The report divides the students into four groups according to their socioeconomic status. For our purposes, we will only consider the highest and the lowest quartiles as the other two show in-between results and are not as significant for our paper. In their report,

OECD showcases a huge difference between the higher and lower socioeconomic statuses in all aspects of the study.

According to their findings in scientific literacy in 2015, students of the highest socioeconomic quartile were far more successful: they scored 559 proficiency points, had 22% of high performers and only 7% of low performers, 80% of these students achieved the National Proficient Standard in scientific literacy. Students from the lowest quartile showed worse results: they scored only 468 proficiency points, only 4% of students were high performers, while 29% were low performers, only 44% achieved the National Proficient Standard. Looking at the results of 2006, the gap between the lowest and highest quartile slightly decreased. On the other hand, however, the results of 2006 and especially 2009 were significantly higher than those of 2015. The proficiency levels decreased by slightly less than one level which is equal to approximately 1 year of schooling (Thomson, Bortoli, Underwood, 2017). Center for the Study of Higher Education in Melbourne has conducted another research on the levels of participation of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. They explain the lower rates of higher education participation by students of low socioeconomic status by two factors: non-completion of secondary schooling and either pursuing an actual profession instead of studying or progression to the VET sector (James et al, 2008).

According to their findings, only 59% of students of low socioeconomic status complete Year 12, compared to 64% of students of medium socioeconomic status and 78% of students of high socioeconomic status. Moreover, the

Northern Territory presents the most shocking results, having only 12% of students of low economic status actually complete Year 12. Moreover, only 32, 9% of students of lower socioeconomic status pursue a university degree. Other go for VET certificates (IV+ certificates - 19, 2%, Entry level - 4, 4%). Others are working as apprentices or trainees (14%), or full-time workers (22%). 7, 6% are still looking for work. On the other hand, the majority (56, 9%) of students of higher socioeconomic background pursue a university degree. There are also some studying in the VET sector (Certificate IV+ - 13%, Entry level - 2, 9%).

The percentage of apprentices/trainees (8, 4%) and full-time workers (15, 8%) is much lower, and so is the percentage of unemployed (3, 1%). It is apparent that the government tries to improve the situation; however, it cannot cross the border of equality too much to give equity to anyone, which is understandable. Previously, there were doubts as to the need of putting admission fees and student caps on some specific universities that are in high demand. It was believed that a higher number of students would lead to a decline in quality of education.

Contemporary studies, however, show that not imposing admission fees or student caps does not reduce the quality of education in the slightest. If anything, it gives access to more students, which in perspective will be beneficial to Australia's economy. Moreover, educational establishments are practicing new methods to attract students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, there are programs for students of Years 7-12 for those in need. These students are given financial help as well as are

assigned a worker that helps the student, his family and coordinates special events for the sake of realizing the program. Some universities do not target specific families, but rather help schools with a higher percentage of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. There are also programs for Year 11 students that allow them to visit the university weekly to learn more on advanced subjects such as medicine, teaching, technology etc. There are also specific programs for school graduates seeking admission to the university. Some universities assign additional points at the admission stage to those students that come from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

There are also many scholarships for students from disadvantaged families but some universities are concerned that there are simply not enough scholarships for every student from the low socioeconomic background (James, 2001). There are other initiatives that are smaller in scale but greatly help students of low socioeconomic status. These include subsidies for accommodation, second-hand textbooks and vouchers, equity computer schemes, financial advice and education, student loan funds, grants for professional placements and “blocked” timetables to assist students with travel expenses. While these programs greatly reduce the expenses of students of low socioeconomic status, most of them still confess to having problems both with striking a good balance between studying and working, as well as managing their funds properly (James et al, 2008).

As a side note, it is important to mention the results of another study, which shows that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are as likely to get employed as anyone else - including being employed to their desired jobs

and jobs with high salary. In this regard, the background does not actually matter - rather the education. The chances of getting better jobs in Australia without proper education are significantly lower. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that students from the low socioeconomic background are still less likely to get their desired jobs if we take into consideration the fact that more of them are not getting a university degree (Li, Mahuteau, Dockery. & Junankar, 2017).

To sum up, the problem of equity is still very sharp in Australia but there are many programs that are aimed specifically on the students with low socioeconomic status. Unfortunately, government and universities are not able to give equitable opportunities to everyone, but the results of the longitudinal research show a slow but steady reduction of the gap between students from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds. Australia is probably on the right way to achieve equity for everyone - the problem is that it will take a long time before complete equity is actually achieved. However, the educational establishments should not sacrifice the quality of education for the sake of equity, because it will nullify the purpose of education in the first place.