

# THE CONVERSATION

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## Why poor kids continue to do poorly in the education game

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*The Conversation is running a series, Class in Australia, to identify, illuminate and debate its many manifestations. Here,*

*Stewart Riddle outlines the correlation between low socioeconomic backgrounds, and poorer results in the classroom.*



Years of schooling separate the rich kids from the poor kids.  
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We like to pretend that social class doesn't matter in Australia, but the reality for children from low socioeconomic backgrounds paints a very different picture when it comes to education.

Why is talking about social class considered **taboo** in Australia?

## Markets, education and class

One answer might be found in the pervasive influence of what Raewyn Connell calls the "Neoliberal Cascade", where education is marketised and seen as a commodity. Market ideas of scarcity, access, competition and profit dictate education reform efforts.

Neoliberal ideas of individual freedom and autonomy, coupled with a fervent belief in market forces to "fix" education and provide social mobility have contributed to ever-increasing inequality.

In his book, *Educating the 'Right' Way*, Michael Apple demonstrates that the marketisation of education has led to the "exacerbation of existing social divisions surrounding class and race".

The rich get richer while the poor continue to get poorer. And that bastion of Australian success, the middle class, continues to feel downward pressure.

We are not alone in this. A review of research in the UK found that social class is the strongest predictor of educational achievement. In the US, a gap of up to **four years of schooling** exists between wealthy and poor students. And the gap is growing.

A particularly seductive neoliberal education myth is that of aspiration and attainment. Put simply, if a student works hard and applies themselves to their studies, then the world is their oyster. The research shows that this creates a deficit image of disadvantaged young people who are individually responsible for their own lack of educational attainment.

The growth of private schooling is evidence of the power of market forces and neoliberal narratives of choice and competition. Yet these forces produce more **inequity** in an already lopsided system.

## Class matters

Social class is closely linked to notions of race, gender, culture, language and discourse. Each of these contributes to a complex set of subjectivities that are produced, contested and

taken up by young people. Education is a key intersection of these factors where social and cultural reproduction and inequality occurs.

Socioeconomic status, Indigeneity, English language proficiency, disability and school remoteness were all identified in the Gonski review as the key dimensions of disadvantage.

Children who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to have low educational attainment. This has multiple implications, including health, criminality, economic participation, literacy and numeracy. Issues of functional illiteracy are closely linked to significant social impacts.

Getting a decent education leads to much more than a decent job. Education contributes to the building of social and cultural capital, which are necessary for a fulfilling and productive life.



Not getting an adequate education has worse consequences than not getting a good job. [www.shutterstock.com.au](http://www.shutterstock.com.au)

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Children whose parents are unemployed had the lowest mean scores in the 2013 NAPLAN tests, while students who had parents in the highest occupation group (including senior managers and qualified professionals) scored the highest. The higher the level of education and employment of the parents, the better the performance of the students.

Performance in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) reflected a difference of two-and-a-half years of schooling between students in the highest socioeconomic quartile and those in the lowest. This is further evidence of equity and access issues in Australian education.

## Funding reforms are part of the picture

The Gonski review recommended a needs-based funding model that would work towards addressing some of these equity issues. The review explicitly stated that funding should aim to ensure that:

Differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions;

All students have access to a high standard of education regardless of their background or circumstances.

It is troubling to hear prime minister Tony Abbott flagging a **slowdown** in investment in public health and education funding, the two biggest factors in life success for children from poor families.

The ongoing **confusion** over the government's commitment to an equitable model of school funding is not helping the situation.

Targeted funding is only part of the solution to issues of disadvantage and inequity in education. Also required are parent and community engagement, early intervention and flexible implementation of strategies that are contextually relevant.

Diversity, transparency and clarity are all needed if we are to have any chance of improving educational opportunities for the most disadvantaged.

It is also important to focus on engagement and ownership of learning by young people in a way that recognises and values their existing knowledge.

But first we need to break the taboo and acknowledge that we need to talk about class if we are to have any meaningful debate about the best ways to provide quality education to all Australian children.

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*See the other articles in the series [Class in Australia here](#).*