

Damaged children, damaged society

Formatted: Width: 20.99 cm,
Height: 29.7 cm

The words of a primary school learning support coordinator are still ringing in my ears, "There are so many damaged children in this class it makes you cry". This comment, although quite alarming to a parent or community member, is getting far too familiar in primary schools around this state.

To a primary school teacher, a damaged student means a child who will probably grow up to be a damaged adult; an adult who will have difficulty with relationships, struggle with a permanent job because of their poor literacy skills, have a high probability of abusing illegal substances, be susceptible to mental health issues and probably spend some time in a jail.

In the past, these children were nearly always from low socio-economic areas, however, schools from all areas are now having to deal with at-risk children.

Primary schools have the community role of educating students from Kindergarten to Year 7 in the eight learning areas as well as reinforcing the values of our society. This role is what teachers have been trained for. However, in many schools this role is being challenged by the mere fact that the children entering school do not have the pre-requisites to start their learning.

Schools are now enrolling three distinct types of children:

The first group and thankfully by far the majority are children who have had a full and happy childhood before they enter kindergarten and formal schooling. They have had a great upbringing by dedicated and committed parents. They have had their regular pre and post birth medical checkups with intervention where necessary.

These lucky children have been read to, talked to and had countless opportunities and experiences such as playgroups, to mould their young minds and bodies. Pleasingly these children will enter their teenage and adult lives with all the necessary skills to succeed.

The second group of students will struggle in school due to their undiagnosed and untreated specific social, learning and developmental problems. Although children in the past also had these difficulties, schools are now enrolling a far higher proportion of students that are not prepared for formal learning.

Teachers in classrooms are now confronted with a growing number of students who have had little or no medical or learning intervention, and in some cases are not even toilet trained. Many have major issues with sight, hearing and speech that prevent them from learning and reaching their potential.

A growing number of children also have major socialisation problems where they find it extremely difficult to play with their peers, concentrate for any length of time or take simple directions.

In the first three or four years of life, children need to be exposed to situations that enable them to develop abilities and behaviours that control and regulate and stop actions, monitor and change behaviour as needed and plan for future behavior when faced with a new situation. A growing number of children unfortunately have not been exposed to situations that allow these functions to develop.

There is also now a group of children entering kindergartens who have very complex mental health issues due to their exposure to neglect, lack of nurturing as well as both mental and physical abuse. Around twenty to thirty years ago such children were a rarity in a school. However, if you ask a Kindergarten or Pre Primary teacher in some schools, they would be able to identify not one but two or three children who fall into this category in each classroom.

Sadly, only a few of these damaged children will emerge from their disadvantage, despite the dedicated work of para-professionals and teachers who work with them every day. The job has become so complex some schools are at breaking point.

The sad reality is that medical and educational researches have been reporting these complex problems to the public for many years, however, no one seems to be listening. Our decision makers know we have a major issue but there is very little coordinated action on the ground.

Many parents and the general community also understand that there are growing problems, but believe it only occurs in other suburbs or at other schools and it will not affect their family. How wrong they are, for damaged children lead to damaged adults which leads to the whole society paying in one way or another.

We already know that a high proportion of the teenagers and adults who commit crime on society, will have entered the schooling system from the latter two groups I described. Our present solution to this dilemma, especially at election time, is to call for more police and heavier penalties with the belief that these measures will deter young offenders.

As a primary school principal and teacher for many years I can reliably inform the community, that if we continue on our present path, Western Australia will need a steady stream of new jails to simply cater for the demand. Our taxes in the future will be needed for jails to house our damaged children when they grow up!

Based on well researched evidence collected from many notable medical and social academics and community based experts, Western Australia must lay the groundwork for a coordinated whole of community / government approach to childcare and child welfare. Simply 'catching' the people who offend is the wrong approach if we are to build a sustainable society.

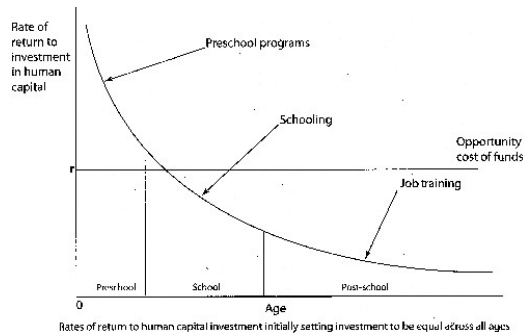
It is clear that society has changed over the last thirty years. The 2009 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) "Social Trends Survey" reported that in more than 1.5 million families, both parents are working. They also indicated that in 80 per cent of couples at least one parent is often or always pressed for time. Figures also show there are now 650,000 people in Australia working two jobs.

Parents are extremely busy and unfortunately have been left to fend for themselves. A quite startling fact is that in this rich and prosperous state we now have over 350 schools participating in Foodbank's WA School Breakfast Program.

It is unfortunate that as the society's workplace arrangements and parents' needs have changed, the structural reform for caring and nurturing our most precious asset has been put on the back burner by successive governments. The lack of proactive coordination in this area has resulted in our present society suffering the consequences of cohorts of children who struggle to learn the basics of social development in the first few years of life.

The advocacy to invest in this area of society is not simply based on compassion for children but on proven economic reality.

Many economists from around the world, including Nobel Prize winner Professor James Heckman, have found continuing positive long-term effects of high-quality early childhood care and education on low-income 3 and 4-year-olds”.



Source: Heckman and Masterov, *The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children*, October 2004.

One such study, “The 2004 Perry Preschool Longitudinal Study”, documented a return to society of more than \$17 for every dollar invested in the early care and education program, primarily because of the large continuing effect on the reduction of male crime.

Investing in the early years is economically prudent. However, the problem is results are not achievable in an election cycle and there needs to be upfront investment before one can get deliverables. These issues, although similar to large scale business investments, are looked on as negatives in our society for many people are after quick fixes and in many cases retribution.

It is time to invest not only in roads, large buildings and the beautification of our surroundings, but also in the human capital of our children who will be the wage earners and citizens of the future.