

EVIDENCE BEHIND THE OUR PLACE ELEMENTS

**Adult
engagement,
learning,
volunteering
and employment**

Executive Summary



ourplace
education is the key to the door

Community participation, adult education and employment are critical components of supporting positive lives and livelihoods for individuals and their families (Tanton et al. 2021; Price–Robertson, 2011).

Engaging with adults, parents and carers to address risk factors for adult social and economic participation helps build thriving communities free from entrenched disadvantage and sets children up for positive life outcomes.

This paper outlines the evidence informing approaches for engaging adults in community activities, learning, volunteering, and employment. It draws on the growing evidence base on breaking cycles of disadvantage and the interrelated risk factors that impact social and economic participation. It synthesises an extensive

evidence base on barriers and enablers for participation in education and employment, and the factors that support adults experiencing disadvantage to engage with their community, with social groups, with schools and other learning organisations, and to connect with employment pathways. This summary is structured into four chapters:

1. Why engaging with adults matters: breaking cycles of disadvantage and turning the curve for children.
2. Approaches to community participation: types of engagement and the role schools can play.
3. Adult learning: needs, barriers and enablers for better adult engagement.
4. Employment: pathways out of poverty and towards greater income security.

1 Breaking cycles of disadvantage

Entrenched disadvantage is multi-layered, persistent and intergenerational (Tanton et al., 2021). People living in more disadvantaged communities have poorer outcomes across almost every social indicator (Tanton et al., 2021; AIHW, 2017; ACOSS, 2015). Living in disadvantage is associated with higher risks of social isolation, poor mental and physical health across communities, and increased violence, family conflict and suicide. For children growing up in poverty, this means increased chances for developmental vulnerability and negative life trajectories and significant risk factors are low levels of education and unemployment among their parents and carers. Low rates of education and employment can have negative impacts on children’s wellbeing and achievement at school. Impacts are even greater when the child’s home, community and school are all disadvantaged (Warren & Edwards 2017).

Building the skills and capabilities of adults in the community, is central to addressing intergenerational disadvantage and breaking the cycle, with key areas of focus being:

- Addressing low levels of literacy and numeracy, and low levels of educational attainment and vocational qualifications (Tanton et al., 2021), which prevent social participation and limit labour market competitiveness.
- Addressing long-term unemployment which has numerous adverse impacts on quality of life, and health and wellbeing outcomes for adults and their children, and the growing rates of underemployment associated with poor job security and variable incomes (Davidson et al., 2020; Tanton et al., 2021).



2 Supporting parental and wider community participation

Opportunities for social connection are particularly critical for communities experiencing disadvantage, where families often have higher levels of social isolation, less access to informal social support, and reduced social capital (Tanton et al., 2021; and Price-Robertson, 2011). Research highlights four key benefits of social and community engagement activities:

- **Lifting community aspirations:** Opportunities to participate in and contribute to community, to learn and develop new skills, in non-judgemental, encouraging and empowering environments can be extraordinarily powerful in developing self-esteem and self-efficacy (McDonald, 2011).
- **Protective factors of social connection:** Social connections and informal support networks are associated with improved mental health, more effective parenting, improved child behaviour and stronger social cohesion (Crisp & Robinson, 2010; Zubrick et al., 2008). Highly vulnerable and stressed families may not have the social and interpersonal skills that help people to develop friendships or be part of a group.
- **Skill development and employment pathways:** Involving local community members, parents and carers in the running or administration of the activities, and providing training or potential for employment opportunities, is beneficial for skills development for both social and economic participation (Giancaspro & Manuti, 2021; and Kragt & Holtrop, 2019).
- **Community cohesion and neighbourhood renewal:** Creating more opportunities for community activities and facilitating engagement and enrichment activities that meet community needs is a common component of many placed-based community development programs and collaborative initiatives for neighbourhood renewal. Activities can be a catalyst for collaboration and lead to mutually beneficial agreements for meeting the needs of children and

families and growth in the skills and capacity of local organisations, clubs or agencies.

Schools can play a significant role in facilitating engagement that helps parents, children, families and communities. Broad community participation opportunities help adults and their communities, and when connected to schools, can also aid parent engagement in schooling. Activities often leverage the benefits of a welcoming school environment but can also reach out into communities and connect participants and organisations, building networks and better cohesion across communities more generally.

Key factors of influence and opportunities for building social capital and engaging parents include:

- **Facilitating adult engagement and volunteering** via schools which builds better home-school relations, increases parent and teacher understanding of roles and contributions, and reinforces the value and importance of schooling and education for children, raising aspirations (O’Hehir & Savelsberg, 2014 and Emerson et al., 2012).
- **Enabling greater parent engagement** in learning and improved home learning environments which are associated with improvements in academic attainment, early literacy, school adjustment and student attendance, motivation, self-regulatory behaviour, social skills, retention and graduation rates (Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau, 2017).
- **Designing schools as community hubs** and leveraging the school environment and school community relationships to draw others in, creating welcoming, safe, culturally appropriate spaces for adults; as well as access services, practical supports and learning opportunities (McShane et al., 2012).
- **Creating opportunities** for parents and other adults to come together, to make connections across the community in ways that reflect community interests

and needs, and that foster belonging. Opportunities to spend time with others, in safe spaces, mitigates against the social distress of poverty and isolation, improves mental health and wellbeing, develops personal skills and confidence, and builds social capital (Shield et al., 2011; AIHW, 2022; Price-Robertson, 2011; & Renzaho et al., 2012).

- **Enabling volunteering** in a variety of ways, including parent representative roles or volunteering at school to build parent confidence; give voice and agency to adults; provide personal and employability skills development; and lay foundations for entry into learning and employment pathways (Giancaspro & Manuti, 2021; and Kragt & Holtrop, 2019).
- **Connecting adults, parents and carers** to safe, supportive environments and activities to learn and develop personal and employment related skills, including access to real world work experiences, supportive work placements and other employment opportunities, can provide higher quality of life for adults and their families (Qian, Riseley & Barraket, 2019; Warren, 2017; Mission Australia, 2008).



3 Adult learning

Community participation and lifelong learning is associated with higher levels of positive health and wellbeing, personal fulfilment, and happiness (Gouthro, 2010, in Leyretana & Trinidad, 2022). For those living in poverty, there are many benefits from, and many barriers to, participation in education and work. Gaining skills and qualifications for employment that delivers stable, flexible and appropriately paid work can provide a pathway out of poverty (Warren, 2017). However, re-engaging with education can be very challenging for adults who had very poor experiences at school or had limited opportunities for education in their home countries. Adults in disadvantaged communities also often face significant barriers in securing and maintaining more stable, consistent, and well-paid employment including poor health and disability, lack of transport, childcare, or tools and work wear, or family caring responsibilities.

The barriers to participating in learning have been classified within the literature as:

- **Situational barriers:** arising from an adult's personal and family situation, such as time pressures and financial constraints.
- **Institutional barriers:** arising from the unresponsiveness of educational institutions or a lack of flexibility in the provision on offer, such as inappropriate scheduling or content of provision.
- **Dispositional barriers:** relating to the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of adults, such as believing that they are too old to learn or lacking confidence or interest. (Cross, K. P., 1981 in Pennacchia et al., 2018, p.10).

Adults in disadvantaged communities often face multiple types of barriers to participation in learning and employment. Building aspirations, developing confidence, creating opportunities to participate and experience success, making different types and levels of learning available, and providing support to address practical barriers like cost, transport, childcare and ill-health are all required to boost education and employment outcomes.

Research shows that trusted relationships with work and learning coordinators, tailored and flexible support, programs and courses delivered in ways that anticipate and reflect the needs of the community are critical (Carpentieri 2014; Taylor et al., 2005).

Personalised employment services which best meet the needs and work readiness of (would be) job seekers are likely to lead to better job matches – jobs that better meet both participant and employer expectations – and result in job retention and longer-term employment.

Community-based models have emerged over the last two decades incorporating transitional labour market programs into place-based collaborations and / or social enterprise employment programs for neighbourhood renewal and greater labour market participation for marginalised unemployed (Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019, Mission Australia, 2008, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2007). These use a combination of a more person-centric developmental pathway and supported employment with flexibility to meet needs of individuals and communities.

Key strengths of these approaches include:

- Highly trained staff for intense and personalised support - consistent and personalized social support, including life-skills development and a coordinated approach to individual client needs and support for personal and vocational skills development;
- Strong relationships and are flexible and understanding of the realities of the life situations for disadvantaged job seekers - know the needs of participants, strong local networks and partnerships,
- Integrated and linked support services and work, frequently and for long periods of time.
- A social context for training and development.
- A partnership approach to training and development.
- Holistic support for transitions from exclusion to participation.
- Dynamic training in a live industry context (Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019; and Mission Australia, 2008).



4 Employment pathways

Employment has long been proven to be a pathway out of poverty, however, adults in disadvantaged communities often face significant barriers in securing and maintaining more stable, consistent, and well-paid employment.

UNDERSTANDING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

In addition to being barriers to community participation and to learning, low levels of literacy, educational attainment or achievement, negative perceptions and experiences of school and institutions, low self-esteem and confidence, language and communication difficulties are also barriers to employment. Further to this, disadvantaged job seekers also face barriers due to a lack of work experience and references or practical requirements such as lack of or loss of driver's license or excessive fines preventing re-licensing, and criminal records or ineligible or reticence for certain types of roles given police check requirements. (Borland et al., 2016).

Community and employer barriers to inclusion such as racism, prejudice, and "neighbourhood bias" also inhibit employment success. Neighbourhood factors or place-based barriers encompass not only employer prejudice, but also the potential negative influence of social norms in the community towards work, and exhaustion and withdrawal from the labour market when issues such as a lack of local job opportunities, and poor transport and infrastructure such as childcare and health support services make participation seem impossible. Poor mental, physical health and disability, substance abuse or addiction can mean not just obtaining employment, but holding down a job, is challenging (Netto et al., 2016).

Different subgroups can face particular or multiple barriers to employment, for example, long-term unemployed, migrants, women, First Nations people, people with disability. While there are nuances for difference groups, and some will have multiple barriers to employment, the evidence points to similar conclusions that interventions and programs should be tailored to context and situational family needs and employment services should involve a range of flexible, personalised supports, and there are

benefits from place-based approaches to addressing neighbourhood barriers (see for example – Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019; Mission Australia, 2008; Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2007).

WORK READINESS, JOBS PATHWAYS AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

The literature suggests two high-level approaches to employment pathways:

- A "work first" approach whereby being in employment provides the experience and validation for building self-esteem, habits, work skills and accomplishments, training and work progression; or
- A developmental pathway with stepping stones to reaching employment goals after building work readiness, confidence, skills and qualifications to be more competitive in the labour market.

Work first approaches stem from the evidence on the benefits of employment to health, wellbeing, skills and financial security (see earlier discussion), meaning improved quality of life, sooner, from 'working first' over other pathways. These approaches emphasise that getting any job and having work experience will likely lead to getting a better job rather than an alternative, and potentially longer path of developing skills and gaining qualifications as an entry point to employment (Bennett et al., 2018).

Some research however suggests that work first approaches aiming at 'any job' are not always beneficial given some employment factors can have negative impacts on health and wellbeing (Broom et al., 2006), and that quality of jobs, job-related stresses and the nature of the workplace can negatively impact retention in jobs over the longer term (Modini et al., 2016; Waddell & Burton, 2006). Further, individual choice, sense of control and self-direction in work positively impact employment outcomes pointing to greater success when there is choice over job pathways (Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019).

Alternatively, development pathways address employability skills as well as pre-work-readiness such as self-belief and



self-efficacy, often drawing on group connections and learning for developing social capital, self-esteem and confidence and interpersonal skills. Training and vocational skills develop through short courses and connections to training organisation and exposure to the world of work gained through work experience, community work projects or social enterprises (OECD, 2019).

Exposure to the world of work, understanding interests and building aspirations, and enabling experiential learning from a safe place is important for long-term motivation and practical understanding of labour market opportunities. Social networks, mentors, and role models also provide practical supports like child minding for interviews, access to information and guidance for job search, job brokerage and on-the-job support to retain jobs longer (Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019; Moore et al., 2016; Price-Robertson, 2011; McArthur et al., 2010).

Australian government policies for public employment services and support payments encourage a work first approach, with some limited support for skills and personal development. A 2016 review of employment programs concluded “best-practice in employment program design for jobseekers with high levels of disadvantage include four main elements:

- Develop job readiness skills.
- Assist in obtaining job-specific skills necessary to obtain employment.

- Help place people in jobs.
- Provide on-going monitoring and support in the job placement” (Borland et al., 2016 p.8).

Borland et al., (2016) present a detailed recommendation on components of best practice for providing job readiness which includes an audit of the jobseeker’s available skills, and associated training in a range of common areas of need – “English language training; literacy and numeracy skills; training in basic tasks required in the workplace (such as using IT); job search and job application skills; development of inter-personal skills; an introduction to the workplace and workplace cultures (for example, expectations of employers regarding behaviour and dress; working in teams; working with people from different cultures); opportunities for work experience and volunteering; facilitated access to formal training; and assistance in addressing barriers to work such as lack of transport (for example, assistance in obtaining a driver licence) or childcare.” (Borland et al., 2016 p.8).

The employment services system is currently undergoing further reform with changes not yet fully implemented. Past research has found previous services to be insufficient for Australians experiencing severe and/or multiple barriers to employment (Bennett et al., 2018; Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, 2015; Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2018, in Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019), and that some jobseekers have reported fear and anxiety interacting with services (Australian Council of Social Service, 2018).

Research suggests employment-focused social enterprises may be better placed to assist people with multiple and/or severe barriers to employment. Costs of delivery are high, however, and solutions are generally small scale, focused on locational needs, and not immediately transferable or easily scalable (Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019). Lessons from these practices however are useful considerations for any employment service or support in disadvantaged communities.

These community-based models have emerged over the last two decades incorporating transitional labour market programs into place-based collaborations and / or social enterprise employment programs for neighbourhood renewal and greater labour market participation for marginalised unemployed (Qian, Riseley & Barraket 2019; Mission Australia, 2008; Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2007). These use a combination of a more person-centric developmental pathway and employment (i.e. supported work placements) with flexibility to meet needs of individuals and communities.

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