

## Overcoming a Culture of Low Expectations

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INTRODUCTION

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Countless academic journal articles, bureaucrats' conferences, and newspaper columns are devoted to the many barriers to economic participation that disadvantaged Australians face. Low incomes, poor education, and disability and health problems are just a few.

But often, one of the biggest hurdles disadvantaged Australians face is attitude. Their own attitude. Their parents' attitude. The government's attitude. The community's attitude.

To people who face many barriers to employment, we tell them they needn't really bother. We have such low expectations that their non-participation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Australians with a disability, children of jobless parents, and Indigenous people living in remote communities are three such groups.

### Disabilities

Fewer than half of all Australians with a disability are employed. More than 800,000 are on the Disability Support Pension (DSP). Only 1% of this group leave the pension for the workforce each year. Yet around two-thirds say they have only a mild or 'less than mild' impairment.<sup>1</sup>

Our income support system channels people with a disability onto DSP, even if they have worked before and think they can work again. Once they are on the pension, they have little incentive—and certainly no compulsion—to look for a job.

But we do know that given the right help, many people, even with very serious disabilities, *can* do some work.

In fact, many organisations in Australia are successfully helping people with disabilities into jobs. Goodwill Engineering in Western Australia takes employees with severe physical and intellectual disabilities. Goodwill custom builds fabrication machines for its employees, suited exactly to their level of impairment. Some staff have been working happily and productively on the factory floor for decades.<sup>2</sup>

Cerebral Palsy Alliance in NSW takes high school kids with cerebral palsy on ski trips to show them they can be independent and take risks. Young disabled adults are placed in mentoring programs with some of Australia's biggest corporations.<sup>3</sup>

These people say that with the right attitude, and the right support, almost anyone can work.

We know that working is good for your health. Yet our disability support system funnels people with poor health away from the workplace and onto welfare.

We need to shift our thinking.

### Jobless families

Almost one in eight Australian children lives in a household where no parent is working.<sup>4</sup> These families tend to be poor, but poverty is not their only problem. We are now beginning to understand that joblessness can be passed on from parents to children. Parents can inadvertently 'teach' their children a culture of welfare and dependence.<sup>5</sup>

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**With the right attitude, and the right support, almost anyone can work.**

A working parent is a positive role model.<sup>6</sup> But so many Australian children grow up without these role models.

Hundreds of thousands of new jobs have been created over the past four decades, but they have not been evenly spread.<sup>7</sup> Whole neighbourhoods have become either 'work-rich' or 'work-poor.'<sup>8</sup> Jobless families are overwhelmingly concentrated within some communities.

It's in communities like these that a culture of low expectations can be so debilitating.

The Brotherhood of St Lawrence's 'Life Chances' study gives an insight into just how important a culture of high expectations can be. Since 1990, the study has followed a group of 140 Melbourne children from different backgrounds.<sup>9</sup> The findings are surprising.

Of the 10 children *most* disadvantaged at birth, eight had moved out of the highly disadvantaged group by the time they were 18 years old. They had finished secondary school, and many were attending university.<sup>10</sup>

These results remind us that children of the poorest parents—both in terms of income and education—*can* go on to become tomorrow's doctors and lawyers.

But something else was at play too. These eight children, who had begun their lives in extreme disadvantage but ended up performing better than average at school, were all children of new migrants. In contrast, the Australian-born children were more likely to remain disadvantaged.

Perhaps the new migrant parents told their children that with hard work and dedication, it was within their power to create better lives for themselves. Perhaps the Australian-born parents, disillusioned after years in the welfare system, did not do the same?

Culture matters. In a meritocratic and socially mobile country like Australia, parents' attitude and behaviour can have a greater bearing on their child's life chances than whether or not they are poor.

We need a better way to instil in kids growing up in jobless families the belief that they can achieve educationally and in the workplace.

### **Nick's story**

Nick was a pot-washer at the old Grace Brothers store on Broadway. From the pot-washing station at the centre of the kitchen, he worked as the cooks and kitchen-hands swirled around him, dropping off dirty pots and picking up clean ones.

Nick's intellectual disability meant that when he started at Grace Brothers, he couldn't speak. He ordered his lunch in the cafeteria by pointing at whatever he wanted to eat.

A year later he could speak fluently, and has been able to ever since.

According to Jobsupport CEO Phil Tuckerman, the normal experience of being valued in a workplace made more difference to Nick than years of special programs he had been put through at school.

Nick's story is not unique. Tuckerman has seen a huge shift in community expectations about what type of jobs people with intellectual disabilities like Nick can do. Until the 1970s, he says, there was no expectation that they could work at all. Children were segregated in special schools, and then in adult activity programs. If they did work, it was in what were called 'supported workshops' (now Australian Disability Enterprises).

In a few short decades, a lot has changed. Now, around 50 to 60 Sydney school leavers with moderate intellectual disabilities—mostly Down syndrome—take part in Jobsupport's Transition to Work program each year. Around 70% go on to work in jobs on the open employment market.

Finding and keeping these jobs is difficult, Tuckerman admits. Most of the people who come to Jobsupport have had limited success at school due to their disability. Despite being integrated into mainstream classrooms (which Tuckerman says greatly improves their prospects of getting mainstream employment after school), most have not learned to read. While some join Jobsupport's program confident in their ability to work, others are far less assured.

Jobsupport staff spend typically around 400 hours on individual assessments, job trials, job search, training, and in-work support to get a person with an intellectual disability working in a 26-hour a week job. Around 260 hours are spent with new recruits in the workplace to ensure they are comfortable with their assigned tasks. Ongoing support and periodic retraining is usually required.

It's difficult to find suitable jobs. It takes around 150 calls to employers to find a suitable job for a candidate. Jobs are often specially designed for individuals with intellectual disabilities, with routine tasks broken into manageable pieces.

But Tuckerman says that while it's a time-consuming process to find a good match, he doesn't face much resistance from employers.

Most people now recognise the benefit that people with intellectual disabilities get from work. What they are more surprised by, according to Tuckerman, is the genuine economic benefit employers get from hiring them.

Around half the positions Jobsupport arranges are specially created to free up existing staff from simple routine tasks, greatly improving a company's productivity. High staff turnover is the norm in menial positions; in contrast, the average Jobsupport client stays in each role for five to six years. Reflecting their value to employers, around two-thirds of Jobsupport clients are on award wages.

Tuckerman says that employers, teachers and parents—and the school-leavers themselves—are often sceptical. But once they see the program in action they are usually convinced. Flying a group of dubious Melbourne-based parents and teachers to Sydney to see new recruits in their jobs was, according to Tuckerman, 'a breakthrough.' Now the program operates in both cities.

So what happened to Nick? The experience of working has not only given him confidence and social skills but also an income that he would never otherwise have—income that he now uses each year to travel with his family on holidays to Greece.<sup>16</sup>

## Remote Aborigines

About 70,000 Indigenous Australians live in remote settlements. Most are unemployed. There are often many jobs available, either in nearby mines, in tourism, or local government. But few jobs go to local Indigenous people.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of real jobs, Indigenous people have often gone onto the Community Development and Employment Program (CDEP). Locals perceptively refer to CDEP as 'sit-down money.' Often, they were paid for tasks such as cleaning their own house.

By counting CDEP tasks as 'jobs,' policymakers were able to pretend that the employment situation in remote communities was much better than it actually was. Now, the painful process of pushing remote Aborigines off CDEP and onto the open labour market is forcing us to admit a very uncomfortable truth: They are often unemployable.<sup>12</sup>

Few young people in remote Indigenous communities can read or write. Remote Indigenous children in the Northern Territory don't go to school; instead, they go to one of the 42 Homeland Learning Centres.

The NT government admits that these centres are not 'real schools.' Students do not follow the national curriculum. Teachers might fly in for a few hours a day, if at all. Untrained assistant teachers, often practically illiterate themselves, carry much of the teaching load.<sup>13</sup>

Is it any wonder these kids can't get ahead when the adults have given up on them from the start?

Some, such as Chris Sarra's 'Stronger Smarter Institute,' based at the Queensland University of Technology, refuse to give up. They develop leadership programs for teachers and enhance the quality of learning in Indigenous schools in Queensland.<sup>14</sup>

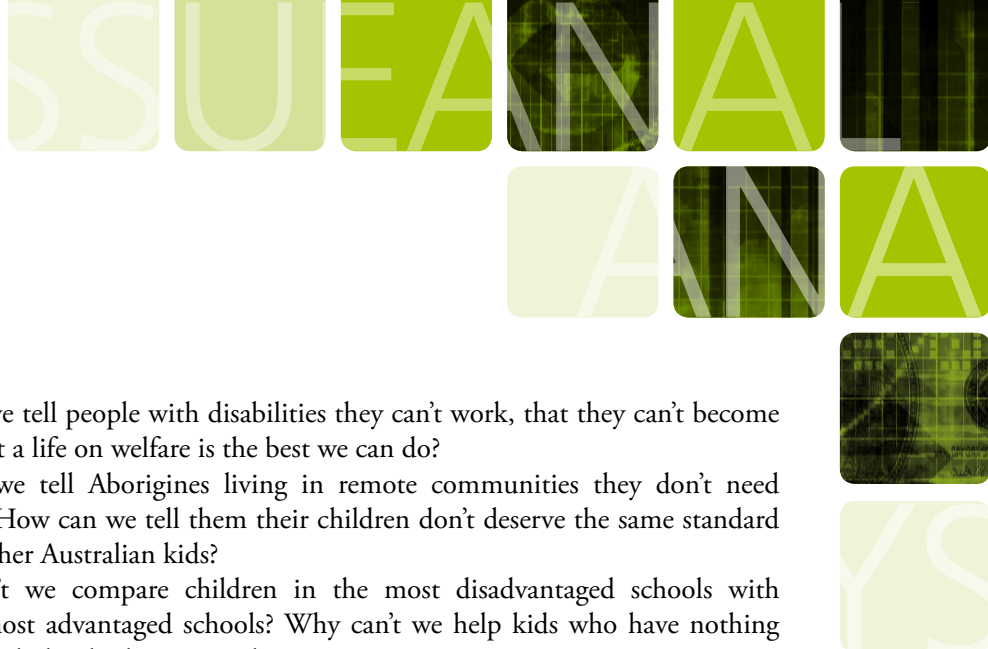
At Noel Pearson's Cape York Australian Aboriginal Academy, students are given remedial instruction to bring them up to mainstream levels of literacy and numeracy. As well as following an academic curriculum, they are expected to participate in arts, sport and cultural programs—just like in other schools across Australia.<sup>15</sup>

Like Sarra, we need to stop making excuses for the educational under-achievement of Indigenous kids. Like Pearson, we need to have radical hope.

The theme that brings together these three groups—people with disabilities, young people in disadvantaged and welfare-dependent communities, and remote Indigenous people—is that for too long we have told them they can't achieve. Sometimes it's implicit. We give them welfare without attaching any conditions. We subject them to different rules. We make excuses on their behalf. We tell them that because it's going to be really hard, they needn't bother trying. We kill them with what we think is kindness.

Sometimes our low expectations are explicit, like a Centrelink officer telling a young person with disabilities to apply for a disability pension rather than look for a job.

**The most damaging kind of poverty is not a lack of income but a lack of aspiration.**



Why should we tell people with disabilities they can't work, that they can't become self-sufficient, that a life on welfare is the best we can do?

Why should we tell Aborigines living in remote communities they don't need to get a real job? How can we tell them their children don't deserve the same standard of education as other Australian kids?

Why shouldn't we compare children in the most disadvantaged schools with children in the most advantaged schools? Why can't we help kids who have nothing achieve as much as kids who have everything?

The most important thing we can do to encourage disadvantaged Australians into work is to turn our culture of low expectations into one that supports high achievement.

In a wealthy country like Australia, perhaps the most damaging kind of poverty is not a lack of income but a lack of aspiration.

## Endnotes

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