

27 August 2021

Productivity Commission – Submission by the Graeme Dingle Foundation,

“A fair chance for all. Breaking the disadvantage cycle”

Background

The Graeme Dingle Foundation (‘the Foundation’) runs a series of nationwide programmes aimed at helping children and young people overcome life’s obstacles and succeed. Our programmes are predominantly focused on vulnerable communities where there is social disruption, early school drop-out rates, high youth suicide, inter-generational unemployment, and in some areas, geographic isolation.

In this current year, we are serving the needs of 28,000 tamariki and rangatahi 5-18 years across the country as well as delivering programmes in community for young people between 16-24. The Foundation is a leader in child and youth development. We work with 40 communities in 11 regions of Aotearoa and while we have a national framework and support systems, each region is governed by a local trust who directly employ local staff and mentors to reflect the specific needs and demographic make-up of young people in each area.

Where should the Commission focus?

1. What are the main aspects of disadvantage that should be investigated in this inquiry?

In our view, the dimensions of persistent disadvantage (PD) can break the intergenerational cycle are related to the confidence and ability to effect change in a person’s life (Aspiration). This is related to self-efficacy, resilience, and connectedness. The earlier the intervention to embed these skills and change behaviour the better.

Sadly, Aotearoa’s statistics around children and young people are appalling and have been for many years; the latest UNICEF report reinforces this - Aotearoa is currently ranked 34 out of 41 and has the worst rate of youth suicide. Our high suicide rate is indicative of a much wider range of issues in this country.

We know the unfortunate reality is that not everyone gets the same start in life; many grow up in difficult environments or have obstacles thrown in their path. However, through building self-belief, confidence, self-respect, and respect for others; through learning to set and achieve goals and make good decisions (little victories), we have seen how lives can be turned around.

It is a whole lot more cost effective to build a fence at the 'top of the cliff' than it is to continually send ambulances to the bottom. The Foundation would encourage a deep dive into early intervention to support getting people out of intergenerational issues.

In the Foundation's experience, the predominant focus should be on vulnerable communities where there is social disruption, early school drop-out rates, high youth suicide, inter-generational unemployment, and in some areas, geographic isolation. Unfortunately, these are all significant societal issues which can set people at a distinct disadvantage, especially children. Therefore, it is vital we can support our youth early on, to realise their potential and equip them to positively influence their families and communities.

2. Where should the Commission focus its research effort?

Preparing Aotearoa's youth for the life skills and resilience to overcome setbacks and challenges they will face in the job market is key. We note the Commission's inquiry is aligned to, and supports the Government's broader social policy and sustainable development and goals, and we support a particular focus on:

- **Māori and Pacific** – Lifting Māori and Pacific incomes, skills, and opportunities
- **Child Well-being** – Reducing all forms of poverty and improving child well-being
- **Good Health and Well-being** – Supporting improved physical and mental health outcomes for all New Zealanders
- **Quality Education** – Ensuring access, equity, and quality education for all
- **Decent work and economic income** – Delivering pathways to full and productive employment

As one example, young people who have left school without a clear pathway to further education and/or employment can be extremely problematic. They often lack access to advice and guidance, role models and work experience that help to build their confidence to seek employment. Also, young people may have family ties that restrict their ability to relocate in search of employment.

In addition, young people entering employment may struggle with the unfamiliar work environment and may lack the soft skills they need to be successful in the workplace. Employers too may have unrealistic expectations and a mistrust of young people. This can directly impact their contribution to society and our economy. An Infometrics report undertaken independently in 2019, found that Aotearoa benefits to the tune of \$7.80 for every \$1 invested in the Dingle Foundation programmes in the form of reduced crime, young people getting better jobs and fewer young people becoming dependent on benefits.

In 2020, the economic disruption triggered by the outbreak of COVID-19 has led to higher unemployment and less opportunities in sectors where young school leavers have traditionally expected to seek employment. However, there are more entry level jobs in some sectors, such as roles normally filled by migrant workers. Similarly, a government scheme to support industry skill needs through the COVID-19 recession by scrapping fees for all apprenticeships, has opened up new job opportunities. This has placed additional stress on young job seekers and for some, a need to adapt and shift direction so that they can seek jobs in sectors where there is increased demand for workers. Young people without confidence, resilience and a sense of purpose are struggling to adapt in this environment

The Foundation questions whether Aotearoa's education system and teachers can be expected to effect these changes in their students. Interventions at community level are the most likely to be effective rather than a nationwide mandated set of 'programmes' or support.

Partnerships between schools and community groups that have proven outcomes would be a better model. We ask whether the Education Review office (ERO) or regional Education Hubs have the ability and mandate to accredit these groups, so schools know they are effective at achieving the outcomes needed.

An example of the cut through of the Foundation's work was demonstrated in this year's ERO report 'Learning in a Post COVID World' wherein our Stars programme for year 9 students was recommended as a positive solution to the expected difficulties faced by students (post COVID). The report offered a list of ideas for schools to improve wellbeing and engagement, including mentoring schemes such 'Stars' which trains Year 12 and 13 students to work in groups with Year 9 students to develop self-confidence, resilience and goal-setting.

In addition, the Foundation's school-based Career Navigator programme addresses the essential needs of Aotearoa's youth who are at risk of leaving school too soon and without being qualified or ready for employment.

In response to the growing need to support young school leavers who are currently not in employment, education, and training, the Foundation decided to re-visit a social enterprise concept developed by the Foundation in in 2019, 'Talent Pipeline'.

In 2020 The Foundation responded quickly, developing a pilot programme using a Theory of Change process to explore the relevance of our youth development programmes to support school leavers aged 16 -24 who are currently not in employment, education, or training to become work ready.

The 'Career Navigator Community' programme aims to support school leavers to seek meaningful employment and build work-ready skills. Moreover, it also provides pastoral support for youth and young adults during their transition from unemployment into the workplace and along with mentoring, we believe this is a key point of difference for this unique programme.

3. Where should government focus its effort on finding solutions?

Inter-generational benefits are seen, and will come from the building blocks of helping instil in our youth some of the following values and lessons:

- Building resilience
- Self-belief and well-being
- Social competence, character and sense of responsibility
- Academic engagement and achievement
- Ability to resolve conflict
- School culture and community
- Social connectedness
- Connection to Mentors
- Connection to Community
- Access to pro-social activities

Moreover, we know that Aotearoa's youth unemployment rate (NEET's) is 13% (15-24 year olds) when the national figure is 4.7%. We recommend targeted research to ascertain the impact of building self-efficacy, self-confidence, resilience and employability (soft) skills as part of reducing both unemployment and youth suicide.

Top of the cliff work is the most important for the future proofing of our communities and young, yet while it is hard to measure, we have done this for 25 years (research available on request). As a result, opportunities to support groups who work consistently within this essential space are often missed.

4. Is there anything else that you would like to see covered in this inquiry?

Research

The Foundation recommends a change in strategy by government, which to date has been characterised by a siloed approach to funding streams to address disadvantage. This only reduces the productivity of community groups because of the additional time spent negotiating and servicing contracts. Charitable organisations have extremely limited resources for supporting staff, given funding is almost always directed toward directly supporting young people. Also, often charitable organisations aren't supported to conduct their own independent research, which could better support and inform central and local government as well as government agencies.

The Foundation believes that the Commission's Terms of Reference could also enquire into what services the Government should provide (e.g., welfare) vs what it should fund and leave communities to provide themselves to ensure the needs of each unique community are met. This approach allows for a considered approach which promotes the principals of Ti Tiriti o Waitangi.



Maoridom and Wairua

We would like to see the Inquiry examine what qualitative research we have from youth who have a lived experience of Persistent Disadvantage and also investigate solutions that are proven to move them out of cycle of disadvantage (See the aspects of wairua and mana).

Inquiry informants and stakeholders

We understand that the Commission will meet with stakeholder groups as part of this inquiry. The Graeme Dingle Foundation would like to respectfully offer to be involved in any aspect the Commission would consider we can be of assistance.