

Low decile schools and teacher professional development.

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(This backgrounder is an abbreviated version of a paper titled *Education, teachers and the children of the poor* which was presented at the University of Otago School of Education, Researching Professionals Symposium on 15 July 2009)

New Zealand, like most other western and non western countries, has an abysmal record when it comes to achieving successful educational outcomes for children of the poor. Wylie (2003 p.2) states that “poverty is a stronger predictor of children’s achievement levels than family type.” With few exceptions (Finland, arguably¹) most so-called western countries teach the children of the poor badly.

Ever since the universalising of education in 1877, those in New Zealand’s low socio-economic (ses) groups have been failed by our education system. While there undoubtedly are some mitigating factors caused by people themselves I place the responsibility, for the most part, on the wider political and economic system, and naturally on the education system – a subset of the latter two. As C. Wright Mills suggests in “The Sociological Imagination” (Mills, 1971), we must always look to history, economics, politics to understand such pressing and ongoing issues.

Historically we can look at education before the 1877 Act. Before the state apparatus became involved, the poor, it seems, simply did not have access to education. Community initiatives and church groups (in particular) had most influence on the establishment of formal provincial education. Native schooling was available to some Māori, and for a period of time more Māori could read than Pakeha. Stephenson (2008) and Shuker (1987) describe how education was partially designed to bring social, political and cultural order, and how education was positioned as a ‘favour’ to the poor.

In the following sections are brief examinations of educational outcomes for the poor during three political, economic and ideological times: the Welfare State, which for this paper’s purpose will go from post Depression until 1984 (or in Education 1987), the Neo-liberal era, from 1987 - 1999, and finally the Third Way, from 1999 until, arguably, the present day. While I treat the three as separate entities there is considerable overlap. In the second part of the paper the focus moves to the kind of professional development I advocate for teachers working in low decile schools.

The Welfare State – education as a right (post Depression – 1987)

Welfare State education policies focused on equality of access rather than equality of opportunity, creating what is often described as a liberal-progressive approach to education. Under the guidance of Clarence Beeby and Peter Fraser (in particular), the Welfare State meant that all were entitled to education, the age of entitlement in the compulsory sector gradually increased, and tertiary education became available to those who passed specific examinations. The ideology of egalitarianism underpinned

¹ Compulsory, free, equity based state funded schooling is arguably one of the main institutions which ameliorates social division and prevents structural inequality within Finnish society (Sahlberg, 2007). Finland is consistently a top performer in the OECD PISA surveys (OECD, 2007).

policies; this essentially reproduced the status quo – in other words the poor left school well prepared to do a working class job while the wealthy gained the education which allowed them to go on to University and the professions. Bowles and Gintis (1976) used correspondence theory to describe the process by which this reproduction happens. The Thomas report (1944) on curriculum in secondary schools, and the Currie report (1962) provided insights into prevailing attitudes, and the education system. Urban migration for the Fordist economy, by Maori (from the country) and by Pacific Island nationals, resulted in state housing suburbs like Mangere, Otara and Porirua being established. Awareness evolved amongst academics and professionals that those living in such areas, the lower ses groups, were underachieving in education and some used deficit theories to explain away disparities.

This was the era when we were, arguably, closest to a ‘fair’ system. The state provided schools, maintained them, employed the teachers and principals (and moved them around with policies such as Country Service), provided library books and art materials, and private enterprise was not able to tip the tables. Schools looked and felt much the same, wherever teachers taught. If ever there was a time when low ses groups, theoretically, could achieve, when there was managed equality of access and resources between different ses levels, the Welfare State was the time – but to a large extent it didn’t happen. We need to question why.

Neo-liberalism – let the market rule (1987 - 1999)

Neo-liberal philosophies, ideologies and policies became prevalent with the Labour Government in 1984, and they impacted on Education from 1987 onwards. Laissez-faire capitalism and what this meant has been well documented, by, for instance Kelsey (1995) and Shirley (1990). In brief, from decades of being a welfare state which prided itself on its care for citizens, New Zealand moved almost overnight to a user pays, market driven economic system. State assets were sold and/or privatised, welfare systems were cut back to the core, and an emphasis on the market and competition was posited as the best way for New Zealand and New Zealanders to emerge from the dire economic situation the Labour Government inherited.

What happened to education during the years 1987 through to 1999 has been carefully critiqued and researched (Codd, 1990; Dale & Robertson, 1997; Gordon, 1992, 1997; Jesson, 2001; Olssen & Matthews, 1997). In brief, and mirroring macro economic and social policies, the introduction of *Tomorrow’s Schools* (Department of Education, 1988) meant that schools became self managing enterprises, in competition with each other for pupils, resources and teachers. Boards of Trustees became the employers of all staff in schools, from the Principal through to the cleaners. Macro level education policy changes, for instance in school zoning, impacted on what happened in our country’s classrooms. Operations expenses were bulk funded and moves were made toward the bulk funding of teacher salaries.

Many research based publications criticise the effects of marketisation on education (see for example Lauder, Hughes, & Watson, 1999). Marketisation brings with it winners and losers. In New Zealand the winning schools were usually those in wealthy communities. The social, economic and cultural capital of wealthy communities found a real outlet in state schools, and many of those schools became even more comfortable, learned and supportive places to be. Private enterprise was allowed in for the first time, and ‘business-school partnerships’ evolved. The loser

schools were those the children of the poor attended. A multitude of studies (Blaiklock et al., 2002; Education Review Office, 1996; Harker, 2000; Wylie, 1999) discuss policies and outcomes as they related to poor children and their communities at that time. *When the invisible hand rocks the cradle: New Zealand children in a time of change* is a research study funded by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre. The study investigated the impact of economic and social reforms in New Zealand, from the mid - 1980s, on the well being of children. The authors include Cindy Kiro and Ian Hassell, both ex Children's Commissioners. The report states:

... education reforms were associated with increasing inequality at all levels of the sector, with growing gaps and continuing disparities between Māori and non-Māori, and evidence that Māori and Pacific children, and children from low income families, are disadvantaged ... There appear to be financial and other barriers to equal participation in education (Blaiklock et al., 2002 section 6.3).

As already indicated, *Tomorrow's Schools* resulted in operational bulk funding for schools. The effects of this policy are visible even today in the differences between state schools – entrance ways and staffrooms say a lot about how rich or otherwise schools are, and there are also the less visible things such as some schools having few computer resources, and children unable to afford trips away from the school. For most schools and for most children, *Tomorrow's Schools* policies appear beneficial. I suggest, and research supports that, in most cases, this was and is not the case for the children of the poor.

The Third Way (1999 - ?)

Giddens (1998) describes the third way as the renewal of social democracy; it includes the valuing of equality, protection of the vulnerable, freedom as autonomy, no rights without responsibilities, no authority without democracy, cosmopolitan pluralism, and philosophic conservatism. A concurrent emphasis on the importance of a knowledge economy often includes renewed emphasis on the benefits of education. Contemporary research findings and a recently released report demonstrate that, yet again, lower ses groups are not reaping educational rewards.

Wylie (2003) leads the NZ based longitudinal Competent Children research project (500 children, Wellington, from 1993 when they were in their final year of ECE). The research follows children from 5 years to 12, and it includes discussion on factors that make a difference for New Zealand children from low-income homes. Table 2 of Wylie's paper looks at family income groups of children at age 5 (low, medium or high) and then looks at the % of children in each group reading at the median or above in Reading at age 12, and similarly at the % of children achieving at the median or above for Mathematics (PAT testing). It provides evidence of income related difficulties (correlation). The percentages (from low to high family income at age 5) for Reading were 36, 52 and 66, while for Mathematics they were 32, 51 and 71.

The Child Poverty Action Group recently published *Left behind: how social and income inequalities damage New Zealand children* (St.John & Wynd, 2008). This child-centred report looks at the impact of child-based welfare assistance (policy effects), work first policies, taxation (flat tax regimes are regressive), health (children in poverty are three times more likely to be sick), housing (availability and costs, transience, state housing), education (ECE access problems, funding for low decile

schools, zoning manipulation) and social hazards (gambling, alcohol, smoking) on New Zealand's poorest children. The writers note that since 2000, despite a better economy and increased paid employment, little has changed for the 185,000 New Zealand children who live in severe and significant hardship.

Poverty impacts on school achievement. International data is demonstrating that, at this time, we in New Zealand, while generally rating very highly in education achievement in comparison to other countries, have a long tail of educational underachievement. In other words, the gap between the group of children who achieve in the system, and those that don't, is very wide.

So what can we do?

This paper started with history, economics and politics. It is essential to be able to contextualise the situation of the children we face daily in our classrooms. They are children; their economic situation is not of their making, no matter what it is. If we are privileged enough to teach, then we need to make a point of understanding the whole context of children's lives.

It is of concern, when looking back historically, to see what has happened to the children of the poor, over and over again, and how they have been so poorly served by the education system. As a sociologist of education I look to contextual explanations – to politics, history, economics. Like Anyon (2005) I see macro-economic policies usually and often trumping the very best of educational intentions. The reports I have discussed, *The invisible hand that rocks the cradle ...* and *Left Behind: ...* each demonstrate the powerful influence of macro non-education policies. Policies such as market rents for state houses, the availability of adequate housing, transport costs, the minimum wage, and health costs all impact on the education system, they trump it, and they undoubtedly have a huge impact on children in low decile schools.

As a teacher and researcher, I also look to agency – what we as teachers and education professionals can do about the situation. With the essential proviso that macro level issues are simultaneously addressed, and that greater equity provision is made in our schooling system (a fairer system, greater funding, resourcing, staffing issues addressed, professional development) I believe we have a great deal of power and all of us can make some positive difference.

Teachers

Teachers are powerful people; what we do, how we teach, how we relate to children and our communities can and does make a difference; it is our professional responsibility to understand the situation of the children of the poor and do something about it. Teachers have a very powerful place in the 'making a difference' agenda – while they are not the whole solution, teachers often are a very large part of it. The very best people in any society – the most intellectual, the kindest, the most generous, and the most critical – should be our teachers. In particular I place emphasis on the intellectual aspect of teaching. We should be public intellectuals – not afraid to voice our opinions on any matters related to education (Said, 1994).

Kanu and Glor (2006) see teaching as highly complex work, with teachers having to function in what they describe as fragmented ways - caused by the requirements of the

third way knowledge economy. They also value teacher intellectualism. Their argument is that teachers need to transform themselves into amateur intellectuals who are sceptical of political and social trends, and who raise any moral issues at the heart of technical and professional activities.

For teachers to function as intellectuals we need theoretical understanding, an enduring hunger for new knowledge, both of which continually inform and cause us to adjust our practice to best meet the needs of those very important people we teach. The remainder of this paper focuses on professional development and teachers in low decile schools.

Professional development (PD)

My concerns centre on the kind of PD being made available to low decile school teachers, its structuring (how, when, what, organisation, rationale) and what it is, or is not, achieving. Is it making a difference now, or will it? Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung (2007), in their Best Evidence Synthesis (BES), maintain that, faced with a new teaching strategy, teachers want to know what is practical and useful, in other words they are very pragmatic. These concerns are common to all schools at this time, and their resolution is unlikely to make much of a difference to comparative achievement statistics. The bar will be raised, but the same children are likely to remain 'below average' and below the bar; those in low decile schools.

A particular form of professional development, what Paulo Freire, and Esposito and Evans-Winters (2007) describe as critical action research, is not mentioned in BES. Critical action research has huge potential to make a positive difference in low decile schools. Technocratic, and 'how to' forms of PD, while necessary are not sufficient.

Critical action research is underpinned by Freire's (1972) ideas. In addition to teachers undertaking action research, consciousness raising - in particular related to the socio-political context - is integral. Teachers in low decile schools generally do not live in the areas where they teach. They are often of a different ethnic group to their pupils, and their capital differs in cultural, economic and social ways. Histories and traditions differ. Low decile school teachers take to their professional roles particular understandings of the world, their role in world, and socially/politically constructed understandings of school communities and the lives of the children they teach. We are all social constructions – and if we have the privilege of teaching in a low decile school where we may be so different to the children and their communities it is beholden on us to develop an acute awareness, attitude, knowingness, inquisitiveness and reflectiveness related to those we serve.

Action Research is a kind of research where professionals conduct research on their own practice (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003). Critical action research takes this process an important step further; it presumes a critical theory perspective. This questions what is going on, whose interests are being served, how can the situation be theorised or explained, and what might the researcher's role be in any future action. Examination of issues concerning race, class, gender, power relationships and student voice are integral if a critical perspective is taken. As well as improving the academic, material and emotional situations of students, the expectation is that critical action researchers will add to teachers' own existing ontologies and epistemological

understandings – particularly if those concern the potential for the empowerment of oppressed groups.

The following, final section describes a critical action research project which took place in South Auckland. There are many ways of doing critical action research; *Te Whakapakari* provides one example.

***Te Whakapakari* – the strengthening**

The research project was funded by the Manurewa Enhancement Initiative, and indirectly by the Ministry of Education.

Over recent decades various data have demonstrated that New Zealand's state schools are failing Māori children in both an academic and social sense (see www.minedu.govt.nz). As over 85% of Māori children choose to be schooled in mainstream state schools (rather than Kura Kaupapa Māori, immersion) this is an issue for us all. *Te Whakapakari*'s main aim was to significantly improve the achievement of Māori children in a mainstream primary, and an intermediate school in the South Auckland suburb of Manurewa (Carpenter & McMurchy-Pilkington, 2007).

A strong and central feature of *Te Whakapakari* was that all participants met on a regular (at least monthly) basis in a Freirean style dialogical community, sharing their work and thoughts, and gaining strength from each other. Six teachers/school leaders and two University of Auckland lecturers (Colleen and I) were involved. Colleen is Māori and, given the project's aim, her input was essential. My input as a Pakeha was also essential: most of the participants were non Māori, and Colleen and I wished to model cross-cultural research and relationship methods (Carpenter & McMurchy-Pilkington, 2008).

Te Whakapakari included a range of activities which were intended to strengthen professional practice, critical reflection, and cross-cultural understanding. Activities included a noho Marae (Marae overnight stay); the learning of te reo and tikanga; visiting speakers from the local iwi; dialogical discussion on history, policy, context and teacher agency; discussion, critique and reflection on two compilations of readings; and instruction in critical action research methodology and methods.

Approximately one term after our meetings commenced, the teachers/school leaders chose individual action research problems or hypotheses. All projects were linked in some way to raising the achievement of Māori students. Colleen and I each mentored three teacher/school leader researchers and this included helping them to apply for and gain ethics approval, assistance with empirical work, and data analysis.

Group meetings continued during the action research processes; dialogue was an essential component of the research journeys, especially when the going got tough. Problems and hypotheses addressed by the six researchers included 'changing student behaviour by forming a tikanga based alternative unit for disruptive students' and 'a tuakana/teina model between year levels for improving student literacy'. At the year's end the teachers/school leaders presented their findings to respective school

communities, and also to a University audience. Some have since published their work and findings (see for example Carpenter & Cooper, 2009).

Did we raise the achievement of the students? In some cases yes, in others yes, but not straight away and not in a measurable form. Behaviour improved in most classes, teachers reported much improved and deeper relationships with children, a bilingual unit was set up in one school which did not have one beforehand, and teachers developed a greater respect for te reo and tikanga. All *Te Whakapakari* participants now have a far deeper understanding and appreciation of the socio-political context they work in. All gained an undergraduate paper credit at university (win-win for the extra work), and one student has begun postgraduate studies and worked with me this year in a post graduate Low Decile course.

Te Whakapakari is adaptable, and it could be adjusted to meet the diversities of most low decile communities. A tension is that the *Te Whakapakari* model is not a 'quick fix' remedy with easily measurable outcomes. It involves long term and deep teacher change, much of it at the intangible and intellectual level.

Reflection and conclusion

We are learning to be teachers from our first days at school as pupils. Student teachers bring with them into teacher education preconceived notions about what being a teacher is and how it should be done. If such notions are not interrupted by quality, challenging and intellectual (not just how to teach science and how to manage behaviour) pre-service teacher education programmes, and if PD for in-service teachers focuses on quick fix programmes with immediately measurable outputs, the status quo is unlikely to change.

In any and all situations we have power. I have always believed that teachers have incredible power, every single day, inside their classrooms but also out in the wider world. Professional development is crucial. Paulo Freire argued for 'permanent professional development'; he advocated a pedagogy which includes theory and practice.

Low decile schools do not need 'missionaries' who intend to save children from their lived realities and bank knowledge into their minds. Such schools need passionate, hard working, learned, analytical and intellectual professionals; teachers who are respectful and knowledgeable about difference, who understand to the best of their ability the lives of people perhaps unlike themselves, who are cognisant of the power of both macro and micro level politics, and who are constantly searching – preferably through their own critical research - for even better ways to teach. Such teachers need to believe and demonstrate by their expectations and actions that intelligence and ability do not have barriers related to ses levels.

Macro level policies have a history of trumping well meaning educational policies. Critical action research based Professional Development, in tandem with or preferably prefaced by equity based macro and educational policies, signal positive ways forward.

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