Improving the schooling chances of New Zealand's poorest children: policy and community challenges

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Kia ora koutou.

I was delighted to be asked to speak to you tonight as while I take the point that it is a difficult political environment in which to get much traction on child poverty issues, I think that over the years CPAG has been a very effective advocacy group for many of the most vulnerable children and families in our society. In particular, it has had a strong media presence despite its limited means. To my mind CPAG's strength lies in what Gerald Grace (who used to be Professor of Education at Victoria University) has called 'complex hope' (Grace 2004). Complex hope is an optimism of the will in relation to social inequality but one, which unlike naive hope, recognises the very real historical and structural difficulties which need to be overcome. It begins from a realistic and sophisticated assessment of the structural pressures against social inequality and the possibilities of human action in relation to those pressures. So I think it is 'complex hope' in relation to the life-chances of New Zealand's poorest children that brings us all here tonight and whether you are one of those who is often in the media in relation to child poverty or you work more behind the scenes, I'd like to sincerely thank you for your efforts to improve the lot of low income families in Aotearoa.

Tonight my topic is 'Improving the schooling chances of New Zealand's poorest children: policy and community challenges' and that's no small topic of course. So what I plan to do in the half hour or so I have is:

- give you a sense of my starting points, how I frame the issues.

- talk about four broad areas in which research has shown that poverty makes a difference to children's schooling.

- Finish by suggesting two or three ways to make a difference in each of those four areas – ten ideas in total. Most of them are directions that we in NZ – the Government, schools, the community – should be pursuing but I also want to keep an eye to what is happening in places like the UK and US and suggest a

few policy directions we should be avoiding because they will just make things worse for the poorest children in our society.

Some starting points

Over 40 years of studies in the sociology of education have show that while there are some individuals who buck the trend, children from low socio-economic (SES) families tend to have significantly lower levels of school success in terms of academic achievement than children from middle and high SES families (Ball 2000). A 2002 Ministry of Education discussion of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test results for 15-year-olds in 32 countries, noted that,

> In all countries examined, students with higher family socio-economic status had higher achievement than students with lower family socio-economic status. New Zealand was no exception. In this country the gap was relatively wide. (Sturrock and May 2002: 97)

More directly related to income, the Competent Children study run by the NZ Council for Educational Research has found that parental income during the early years of childhood (0 – 5 years) continues to affect children's achievement throughout their primary schooling:

> Children whose family income was more than $60,000 at age 5 or younger continued to show higher scores for all the competencies at age 10. At the other end of the scale, children whose family income was below $30,000 at age 5 or younger continued to score lower than others on some competencies at age 10, regardless of whether their family income had improved. (Wylie 2001: 28)

The effects of childhood poverty have also been found to impact on participation in tertiary education in New Zealand. A Christchurch-based longitudinal study has suggested that 'able children from professional or managerial family backgrounds are about 1.5 times more likely to enter university than are children of similar ability from low SES families." (Fergusson and Woodward 2000:33).

One answer to this problem which is popular with governments, including our own, is to say if you raise the expectations of teachers and improve the quality of teaching and school management, there is no reason why children from low income families shouldn't achieve as well as the middle classes. And there are some educational researchers, such as those in the school effectiveness and improvement movement, who take this view also. So that's a stance which puts the onus on schools to solve the problem but actually I don't think schools hold many of the answers in ways commonly expected (teacher expectations, pedagogical innovation, school reform). These things can make some difference but most of the answers probably lie outside of schools. As Jean Anyon has put it in the US context:

> …we are aware – and over 30 years of research has consistently demonstrated – that academic achievement in US schools is closely correlated with student socio-economic status. To really improve ghetto children's' chances then, in school and out, we must (in addition to pursuing school based reforms) increase their social and economic well-being and status before and while they are students. We must ultimately, therefore, eliminate poverty: we must eliminate the ghetto school by eliminating the underlying causes of ghettoization…Unfortunately educational 'small victories' such as the restructuring of a school or the introduction of a new classroom pedagogical technique, no matter how satisfying to the individuals involved, without a long-range strategy to eradicate underlying causes of poverty and racial isolation, cannot add up to large victories in our inner cities with effects that are sustainable over time (Anyon 1997:164-5).

That said, I don't see schools as benign either, because in ways that are often not so obvious they help to reproduce social inequalities from generation to generation. To understand this we need to recognise that low income families are not only poor, or have 'low socio-economic status', they are (typically) in a subordinate social class position within society. (There are of course some low income households where a middle class family has fallen on hard times because of a relationship break up or something but those children can still typically capitalise on their middle class backgrounds and generally achieve much better.)

When we think in terms of social class that raises the cultural dimensions of poverty and schooling, and it can be recognised that the lower achievement of students from low income families is not just a question of material resources, it is a question of class culture - of perceptions, beliefs, experiences attitudes, behaviours and power relations. The work of Pierre Bourdieu – the acclaimed French sociologist who died in 2002 - points to schools having a more organic relationship with students from the dominant social class than with students from subordinate classes or ethnic minority students. In simple terms, Bourdieu argued that schools recognise and transmit only middle class forms of culture and therefore reproduce social class inequalities. Schools are not neutral but are set up to favour those already favoured – they have a cultural bias. So that whereas schools appear to be and claim to be to be fair and impartial they actually actively maintain inequality – their role is to quietly sort people into winners and losers based on their initial cultural characteristics, thereby maintaining the dominance of the middle classes.

So that's a challenging analysis but its where I'm coming from and there's a couple more points I want to make about it. First, within sociology, including sociology of education, class analysis is becoming fashionable again after going out of favour for a while (e.g. Devine et al. 2005) but as Diane Reay at Cambridge University has

noted the new understandings of class as everyday processes and practices have as yet had little impact on educational policy and practice (Reay 2006, forthcoming). While there is some growing recognition of the salience of class processes within health (Wilkinson 2005) and housing (Glennerster et al. 1999), within teacher education and education policy, classrooms are routinely presented as classless.

Second, I see class analysis as generally complementing rather than contradicting analyses of ethnic and gender inequalities in education. So for instance, many people and not just Maori, see Kohanga and Kura Kaupapa Maori as the preferred option for Maori. But one of the things I'm going to talk about tonight is the importance of the social class composition of schools and how academic success is somewhat more likely in middle class school settings. So for me one of the issues which is going to help or hinder the success of kura over the long term will be their social class composition and to recognise that not to deny the likely advantages in terms of ethnic culture which will accrue to young Maori who go through Kaupapa Maori education (which in fact fits nicely with the notion of curricular justice I'll be talking about later), its just adding more complexity to our understanding of the issues and I think we need that.

With all that in mind, I now want to look at four ways that poverty and a subordinate social class position depresses children's chances of success in schooling:

1. Their impact on children's learning at home and readiness for school.

This is where we get into many of the areas that CPAG campaigns around:

- Health problems
- Nutrition problems (CPAG in UK are currently campaigning for universal free school meals)
- Housing and overcrowding
- Mobility

Also relevant are:

- Lower take up of early childhood provision
- Fewer curriculum-relevant experiences and resources as a result of poverty (holidays and visits, books in the home, internet access, school stationery).
- Fewer literate practices within the home (less reading, newspapers, academic language development)
- Riskier prospect for working class children to have high aspirations with regard to tertiary education and employment because parents and friends

don't think of that as a possible future in the way that children going to university is more or less an assumed thing for many middle class families.

2. the way low income/subordinate class parents relate to teachers and schools (and vice versa).

For parents with little school success themselves there can be a lack of confidence in dealing with schools and sometimes distrust but research also shows that working class parents are also often too willing to hand over authority to schools. There is a well known US study by Annette Lareau called 'Home Advantage' (Lareau 1989) which shows that working class and middle class and parents tend to divide up responsibility for schooling in different ways. Working class parents tend to see the teacher as the professional, someone to be deferred to, whereas for middle class parents education is seen as a shared responsibility, a relationship between equals.

Roy Nash at Massey (Nash 1993) has also pointed to differences in parent expectations whereby working class parents tend to see 'satisfactory' or 'average' as OK whereas for middle class parents it means something is wrong and is a trigger for action. They will intervene if they perceive their child is slipping and have considerable resources available, for instance arranging extra tuition.

3. the way schools typically treat children from low income/subordinate class families.

There has been a lot of research on the subtle ways schools are still set up for the white middle classes in terms of choice of curriculum content, language, built in assumptions about behaviours and understandings, and numerous other biases in the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment. This is the so-called 'hidden curriculum' of schooling. Grouping practices within schools and classrooms which may ostensibly be about catering for different ability groups often constrain the curriculum for those who end up in 'lower ability'groups.

4. the social polarisation of schools.

New Zealanders perhaps don't like to think about it but especially in our cities, the levels of between-school social class and ethnic segregation is substantial, its pointed up of course by the decile system, and is due both to residential segregation and also to processes of school choice whereby the middle classes can and do choose away from low SES schools. However there are at least five reasons why this situation is not going to help the children of low income families who dominate the low SES schools.

- it leads to unequal flows of parental and community financial and other resources into schools, with low SES schools missing out substantially compared to middle class schools, equity funding isn't nearly enough to compensate.

- it leads to differential access to networks of power and information (the 'old school tie').

- it means that there isn't much electoral pressure from the middle classes to improve those schools, most middle class people have no contact with them at all.

- the social mix of schools may also affect levels of achievement through what are called compositional effects. This is a contested idea, but most evidence, including that from New Zealand, points to high SES school composition pushing up mean levels of achievement and low SES composition depressing them. (Thrupp 1999, Thrupp & Lupton 2006 forthcoming).

- the polarisation of school intakes can act back on the housing market and help to intensify inequalities of wealth within society because people who can live within the zones of popular high SES schools can make disproportionate financial gains on their properties.

Let me turn now to some ideas about what could be done in each of the above four areas through which poverty impacts on schooling

The impact of poverty and a subordinate class position on children's learning at home and readiness for school

1   More universal family assistance to better include families on benefits

The just released Ministry of Social Development report *New Zealand Living Standards 2004* (Jensen et al. 2006) shows that despite the economic recovery, the proportion of children experiencing significant or severe hardship has increased from 18 to 26%. The children experiencing the worst decline in living standards over this time were mainly in families supported by benefits, with an over representation of Maori and Pasifika families.

The governments stance on this is that the Working with Families package and the promotion of a work ethic will fix the problem. However in an article to be published in the *European Journal of Social Security*, Susan St John has carefully unpacked the impact of the Working for Families package and changes to other assistance on opening up the income gap between families 'in work' and those 'not

in work' and argues that

> …while the new spending on Working for Families will eventually significantly reduce the incidence of child poverty in working families, those children whose parents fail the qualifying criteria can be expected to slip further below the relative poverty line and experience increasing rather than decreasing social exclusion.

So what we need is a clear priority to ending child poverty in families on benefits by providing more universal family assistance.

2   Funding schools to better reflect the real effects of poverty

To my mind the increasing gap between the 'in work' and 'not in work' also raises the question of how well equity funding is being targeted to schools at the moment. At present there are about 15 programmes where the funding is determined by decile, especially the general Targeted Funding for Educational Achievement (TFEA, about $100million), the Resource Teachers for Learning and Behaviour (RTLB, about $50m), Special Education Grant funding (about $30m), Alternative Education funding (about $20m) and lots of other bits and pieces,(about $250m in all).

Deciles are based on census mesh blocks and funding is related to factors such as
- percentage of households with income in the lowest twenty per cent nationally;
- percentage of parents in the least skilled occupational groups;
- household crowding;
- percentage of parents with no educational qualifications;
- percentage of parents receiving income support benefits; and
- percentage of students who are Māori , Pasifika, and refugee students receiving ESOL funding.

The last category has been cut out now I think after Don Brash's speech a couple of years ago led to the Government taking fright and reviewing all programmes targeted by ethnicity. But in any case the mesh block approach is only a very general approach to recognising poverty and we need an approach which is better linked up to an understanding of how poverty actually works. So for instance if we are going to take seriously the particular plight of the 'not in work' at the moment, we could provide equity funding to schools according to the proportion of parents who are in receipt of a benefit. [And a point which came up in discussion following the presentation, we should also look at the overall level of equity funding and to what extent it really compensates for the poverty-related demands faced by low SES schools].

The way low income/subordinate class parents relate to teachers and schools (and vice versa)

    3   Requiring strong representation of subordinate class and ethnic groups within schools.

There is no doubt that when you are from a group on the margins, having 'people like us' in positions of power in schools makes a difference. There are various ways you could address this issue – teaching staff, parents associations, Boards of Trustees membership. The Ministry's analysis of the composition of BOT members elected at the 2004 triennial BOT elections (MOE website) provides no analysis by SES, only by gender and ethnicity. The analysis shows that there are somewhat more women elected in low decile schools but ethnicity is not shown by deciles. What the figures do show us that at 778 (32%) schools there were proportionally more parent-elected representatives of NZ European / Pakeha ethnicity than the proportion of Pakeha students, while at the same time 448 (18%) schools had fewer Maori parent-elected representatives than the proportion of Maori students. Regarding Pasifika representation, there were no schools with more parent-elected representatives than the proportion of students, but only 4% had a smaller proportion. The MOE argues that the disproportionate representation of Pakeha on BOTs is not as bad as it seems because the proportion of the school-age population who are Maori or Pasifika is twice that of the population aged 25 to 50 (although I don't think the reasoning quite follows because we are not talking about the general population – those Maori and Pasifika students have parents and why aren't they more fully represented?) But more importantly it seems from the discussion that the Ministry would be content to have Maori and Pasifika parents represented in proportion to the number of students in the school, whereas I think that, especially in predominantly white middle class schools we need a disproportionate representation of working class, Maori and Pasifika parents to improve the home school relations for those groups.

    4   Reporting to parents in more transparent ways.

Here I am talking about reporting in the broadest sense, how schools talk to parents about the progress of their children. Related to what I was talking about earlier, ('satisfactory' or 'average' raising alarm bells for middle class parents but not working class), we need to think more about decoding school success for low income parents. One of the concerns I would have, particularly thinking about my UK experience now, is that in pursuit of objectivity, schools have gone to criterion based reporting so you get reports which say things like 'your child knows their number facts up to 8'. To me as a parent that's meaningless actually, I don't know if its good, bad or indifferent so that like lots of parents I depend on informal discussion with the teacher, if that's not fruitful you are stuck. So its that kind of informal

interpretation which I think schools need to work on, but the other side of it is that we don't just want schools to be telling low income parents their children are failing, schools have to have something to offer as a way forward.

5   NOT becoming more punitive.

This is one of those areas which could get worse, in the UK it seems to me that policy on parents vacillates between carrot and stick, but it can get very punitive, there is fining and even imprisonment of parents of children who are truanting. I just don't think that's the answer, it only addresses the symptoms of lives in crisis and not very well at that.

The way schools typically treat children from low income/subordinate class families

6   Working towards curricular justice.

The main thing within schools is to disrupt forms of curriculum (and pedagogy and assessment) which privilege the cultures of some social and ethnic groups over others. This is what Connell calls 'curricular justice', a fundamental shift in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to suit groups other than the white middle class (Connell 1994). An example might be, say, a programme which provided an authentic history of a particular Pasifika culture, say Samoan culture, was taught and assessed in a way which gave genuine weight to the language and culture of those students as it stands in New Zealand today, and where (crucially), the qualification gained was seen to be of equal standing to that gained in other kinds of courses. This is not an entirely utopian vision: a critical movement centred on race, gender and social class curricular issues developed in the over the 1970s and 1980s and remains an important strand of teacher culture today despite pressures against a progressive curriculum. As I noted earlier, it seems to me this is really what Kaupapa Maori education is trying to achieve and its admirable.

7   NOT increasing testing, target-setting or review

There is now much evidence to show how increased emphasis on assessment against narrow criteria reduces the curriculum as the 'tail wags the dog': schools and teachers are encouraged to teach to the test/target/inspection/performance

management appraisal. A particularly horrible effect of this is the commodification of children as staff in schools are encouraged to think of children not in terms of the children's needs but in terms of what advantages they can bring to the positional wellbeing of the school. This commodification occurs both in the initial recruitment of students and in the management of them once in the school. In highly performative systems schools are encouraged to recruit bright, middle class 'able' children and avoid taking on 'expensive' special needs students and students with behavioural issues wherever possible. Once in schools, children are commodified and some are marginalised through decisions around setting and testing. For instance Gillborn and Youdell (2000) note the occurrence of 'educational triage' where decisions are made to focus on some students at the expense of others, depending on whether or not they are seen to have the potential to enhance their school's position in the examination league-tables.

8   NOT increasing grouping, banding or setting by ability.

I'm not going to say much about this except that it is on the rise again in places like England where it is seen as a way of better targeting students and pushing up their performance. Its fine if you are in one of the top groups, bands or sets, not so good if you are in one of the lower ones, where there is a reduced curriculum and lower self and peer esteem.

The social polarisation of schools

9.   Taking more control over the way schools set their zones.

Having been in the UK over last 6 years, I thought the form of zoning Labour has brought in since 2000 was like it used to be, i.e. the government determined the zones. But actually schools now draw up their own zones working only to the very general definition that a school has to be a "reasonably convenient school" for its students, that is a school that, taking into account a range of factors, a reasonable person would judge to be reasonably convenient. Recently I saw some unpublished research by Di Pearce and Liz Gordon on Christchurch primary schools which is disturbing because it shows that in the absence of government control zones are being drawn up in convoluted ways by schools to "bypass more deprived but closer areas in favour of further but wealthier suburbs" (Pearce and Gordon 2004, p. 7) Moreover Pearce and Gordon point out that school zones often overlap, some suburbs being claimed by three schools, others being left out, making zones "less the tidy product of the old system of regional planning… [and] far more reminiscent of the free market where businesses compete for customers and little or no co-operation exists" (Pearce and Gordon, 2004, p. 8). So I would like to see some more government control over zoning to prevent schools targeting middle class suburbs.

10 Encouraging more public debate about the costs of a socially polarised school system.

Reading a few things off the CPAG website in preparation for tonight, I was struck by how often authors are pointing to the self-interest of the middle classes creating problems for poor families. So for instance Susan St John talks about how it is hard to get much traction on better treatment for the young because of the electoral clout of the voters over 65 who are actually much better off because the pension is not clawed back in the way benefits are. Even more pointed is a critique, by Alan Johnson I think, of the way investment activity from middle class households has pushed up house prices in working class neighbourhoods and hence pushed home ownership out of the reach of lower-income households. This shift increased subsequent demand for rental accommodation and this demand increase, combined with the introduction of the Accommodation Supplement, fuelled rapid increases in rents between 1993 and 1995. As a result the housing position of the poorest 30% of households became one of dependence on the whim of their landlord and on sharply abating benefits.

It's the same in education. Those of us in the middle class create the problem when we concentrate our children in high socio-economic schools. We need to acknowledge that school choice is not value-free: enrolling one's own child in a high SES school has direct implications for the schooling and subsequent life chances experienced by other children from less advantaged families who attend the low SES schools which this action creates. However it would be neither reasonable nor realistic to ask middle class families to exercise individual responsibility for this, you can hardly blame people for wanting to advantage their children. But what we can do by highlighting the problem is create a climate of public opinion which might help support state intervention which responds to this problem, e.g. 'controlled choice' which balances the rights of individuals with the greater good of society. So as they say it's a 'biggie', but one which a fair society would need to grapple with sooner or later I think, in much the same way as individuals might need to be forced out of their cars and into public transport to prevent urban traffic congestion and pollution.

I just want to finish by noting that over the years I have written quite a bit on most of the themes I have mentioned tonight and these are some books where you can follow up the arguments and other related arguments if you are interested:

Thrupp, M. (1999). *Schools Making a Difference: Let's Be Realistic! School Mix, School Effectiveness and the Social Limits of Reform*. Buckingham: Open University Press - this book is about life in high and low SES New Zealand schools, about

compositional effects and about how policy and research doesn't respond enough to the social context of schools.

Thrupp, M. & Willmott, R. (2003). *Education Management in Managerialist Times: Beyond the Textual Apologists.* Maidenhead: Open University Press - This book turns the gaze back on academics, how we too often provide tacit or more overt support for harmful education policy.

Thrupp, M. (2005) *School Improvement: An Unofficial Approach*. London: Continuum - This book provides a critique of current education policy in England and how teachers can contest it.

Finally, I would be very happy to engage further with anyone about what I've presented tonight or indeed what I haven't talked about but should have – my email is thrupp@waikato.ac.nz. Thank you.

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