Educational Polarisation in Brisbane: Rawls's Least Advantaged and the Myth of Choice

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Abstract

A number of researchers have reported increasing socio-economic inequality within Australian society. This result has usually been met with public apathy and political indifference. However, the results of this research conducted in Brisbane shows that the increasing social polarisation occurring in Australian society is being reflected in an increasing educational divide or polarisation. In terms of access to private education, and use of information technology the least advantaged students are faring worse than any other students. Teachers who are committed to achieving a just society through their teaching cannot ignore this situation. This finding emphasises that teaching for social justice must not only focus on intercultural issues but also return to a position of prime importance the goal of achieving greater economic equality.

Introduction

Rawls's much discussed difference principle sets out a clear parameter by which one may judge the justness of a society. That is, any move within a society to a greater level of inequality must be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged. Yet this research shows that over the last twenty years the position of the least advantaged families in terms of access to private education has in fact been made worse off relative to all other families.

Such a situation raises questions of social justice with regard to the much publicised justification of the present Australian federal government in providing increased funding to private schools at the expense of public schools. This justification has been based on providing parents with 'choice' in the selection of school for their children to attend. However, the opportunity to exercise choice not only in terms of schooling but in accessing any number of key social goods for example, health cover is intimately bound up in the social context, particularly the economic context in which families find themselves.

An examination of contemporary economic developments in Australia reveals a growing inequality, which effectively calls into question the justness of the provision of any socially valuable good based on market choice. This is of major concern within the sphere of schooling where the choice appears to be between two systems in which access to one system (private) is perceived to hold substantial advantages in terms of students' life chances over the alternative public provision of schooling.

Based on preliminary research in Brisbane, an Australian city in the state of Queensland, this paper argues that the social polarisation occurring within Australian society is being accompanied by growing educational polarisation in terms of access to different school systems. This polarisation of access is most noticeable in the growing gap between the least advantaged and most advantaged families. These findings provide a strong case that teaching for social justice in schools and teacher education must be as much about advocating the transformation to a more equal society as it is about teaching for diversity. This is particularly important in light of the apparent hijack of the social justice agenda by difference theorists both within the wider society and educational context with their emphasis on diversity rather than issues of greater economic equality. Indeed, the findings of this research indicate that current polarising trends may serve to undermine the goals of teaching for diversity.

Background

Economic globalisation and social polarisation in Australia since the late 1980s

Globalisation is a much contested term however, for the purposes of this study it is defined as, '… the closer economic integration of national markets through increased trade and increased mobility of capital' (Argy 2003, p. 108). The economic impact of global capitalism through industrial restructuring, deregulation, large-scale job dislocation and a dividing workforce has had an enormous impact on Australian society in the last 20 years (Cass 1998, Grimes 1996). There is now a considerable body of research showing that since the late 1980s increasing income inequality within Australian society has been a feature of these developments (Alexander 2004, Argy 2003, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2002a, Bryson and Winter 1999, Cass 1998, Fincher and Saunders 2001, Raskall 1994).

Basically what is occurring in Western societies, including Australia, is a polarising of the workforce into winners and losers. At one end are workers who enjoy full-time work with substantial job security, high income, good promotional prospects, and generous work-related benefits. At the opposite end are those who survive on part-time, casual, or contract work, with little job security, low income, few prospects of advancement to full-time or more permanent work, and a sense of increasing marginalisation as a result of

their status within the workforce (Burgess and Campbell 1998, Callinicos 2000, Cass 1998, Gleeson and Low 2000). It is at the latter end of the spectrum that the majority of new jobs are appearing (Eardley 1998).

The overall effect of these economic changes is causing family households at either end of the socio-economic scale to move further apart in terms of their work status and security and wage levels. This polarisation of family households is most pronounced in the growing trend towards dual-full-time income families (mainly upper middle class) and no-wage income family households (Bryson and Winter 1999, Burbidge and Sheehan 2001, Fincher and Saunders 2001, Gleeson and Low 2000, Hunter and Gregory 1996).

Travers (2001) notes that an educational consequence of this polarisation is reflected by the observation that children coming from homes where neither parent works are at greatest risk of leaving school early and finding themselves marginalised within the workforce and from society in general. McClelland, MacDonald and MacDonald (1999, p. 10) argue that the changing labour market has disproportionately and adversely affected young people particularly early school leavers. It would seem therefore, that certain family households, especially the low income, unemployed and single mothers are bearing a disproportionate burden of the costs of globalisation with few if any resultant benefits.

Bauman (1998, p. 3) in his examination of the human consequences of globalisation contends, 'An integral part of the globalising processes is progressive spatial segregation, separation and exclusion'. This is now examined within the context of Australian cities.

Spatial polarisation in Australian cities

A number of urban researchers argue that the city is a spatial reflection, via the housing market, of the inequalities generated under a free market economy (Badcock 1995, Harvey 1992). Low income families in particular, are finding their choice of location in the city is being increasingly constrained. As a consequence of this Australian cities, as is the case in other western cites, are displaying distinct spatial patterns concerning who lives where.

Gleeson and Low (2000, p. 37) define spatial polarisation as, 'the spatial sorting of city dwellers into areas of relative privilege and disadvantage'. In this context it refers to the tendency of economic processes to increasingly widen the division between poor and rich localities within cities. Evidence suggests that the increasing socio-economic polarisation occurring within Australian cities tends to have a permanency to it because it is structural and embedded in changes occurring in the labour market (Badcock 1997, Gleeson 2002, Maher 1994). The more stringent targeting of public housing towards the very worst off households has been seen as a factor in the trend of increasing socio-economic polarisation between suburbs (Badcock 1997, Beer and Forster 2002, Gleeson

and Low 2000). As a consequence many suburbs in Brisbane now show marked contrasts in the socio-economic profile of their respective populations on key factors such as educational levels, occupational status, income, unemployment levels, and the quality, value and tenure status of housing (Badcock 1997, Beer and Forster 2002, Bryson and Winter 1999, Moriarty 1998, Murphy and Watson 1994). Gleeson (2002, p. 229) describes this strengthening polarisation as the partitioning of different areas of the city for the 'wealthy', the 'coping' and the 'lost'. It is within this economic context that the ideology of 'choice' is presented as justification by the present federal government for increased support for private schooling at the expense of public schools.

The rhetoric of choice

Abbott (1998, p. 154) articulates the neo-liberal position on choice as follows, 'In fact, acknowledging the rights of all parents to choose the school they want for their children (is a move) in the direction of more equal treatment and therefore greater justice to the individual citizens who comprise the Australian community'. Ball (2003) describes the ideology of choice as underpinned by classical liberal views of political and economic individualism. 'These individualisms hail and celebrate independent and rational beings … who generate their own wants and preferences and who are the best adjudicators of their own interests. Choice then is a key concept in the political articulation of these beings', (Ball 2003, p. 31). However, it is contended that the ideology of choice has in the present context of growing social polarisation constrained opportunities for choice of school for differing social groups within Australian society.

Constraint on choice need not be a major concern when alternative systems of schooling offer a service of roughly equal standing. However, there is abundant evidence that attendance at non-government schools brings with it several advantages. These advantages include, higher school retention rates, overall better academic results with the consequent greater opportunity to meet university entrance requirements and therefore access to more lucrative job opportunities, the opportunity to mix with academically inclined students who foster scholastic achievement among themselves, and lower levels of unemployment upon completion of their formal education (Argy 2003, Buckingham 2000, Jones 2002, Teese 2000). Indeed, McClelland et al (1999) found that in a sample of youths aged 19 years 89% of those who had been engaged in marginal activities (defined as not in higher education or training and who had experienced long periods of unemployment or engaged in only part-time or casual work) since the age of 16 came from government schools.

Other advantages accrue from access to a private education. Some researchers (for example, Ball 2003, McGregor 2001) claim that one of the crucial functions of private

schools is to educate the children of upper class and upper-middle class parents to take up careers of power and influence in society and so maintain their social class advantages over other children. As such private schools serve the vital task of reproduction of identity for children of middle class families. In light of this Argy (2003, p. 26) concludes 'Consequently, a student in private schooling is able to get much more educational value than one in public schooling and has a greater capability to achieve good educational outcomes and life chances.'

This research aims to show that within Australia the rhetoric of choice in the contemporary context of growing economic inequality has adversely affected the opportunity for all families to access different schooling sectors. As such this research supports the claim of a number of researchers and commentators who argue that the present school system in Australia far from providing choice is a direct source of continuing structural inequality and a site for growing social polarisation (Cole 1999, Jones 2002, Raethel 1998, Teese and Polesel 2003).

Method

The polarising city provides an excellent lens though which to test the hypothesis that growing social polarisation is statistically and significantly associated with increasing educational polarisation.

The choice of the time span, 1986-2001 was dictated by two considerations. First, census data prior to 1986 would have been time-consuming to access as the data were not available on computer while 2001 represents the most recent census. Second, the 1980s are generally regarded as a time of considerable economic and social change in Australia as it became increasingly drawn into the global market with subsequent widening economic inequality (Gleeson and Low 2000).

Data and variables

The setting for this research were the 156 Statistical Local Areas (SLAs) or suburbs contained within the city of Brisbane which is the capital city of the Australian state of Queensland. All data came from information contained in the national Census of Population and Housing which is conducted by the ABS every five years. Data sets were drawn from four censuses 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001.

For each census year the following data were obtained and formed the variables used in the research. The Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) was used as a measure of relative socio-economic disadvantage and was the independent variable for this research. The ABS constructs this weighted index for each census so that geographic

areas may be compared along a wide range of census variables, which indicate relative advantage or disadvantage. Variables included in the index were, low income households, unemployment, public housing, and occupational and educational categories among others. It was assumed that such an index better captures the multi-dimensional concept of disadvantage than individual indicators such as low income or unemployment. This variable was shown as 'SEIFA' followed by the year of the data for example, SEIFA86 referred to the SEIFA index scores for 1986 and so on.

The dependent variable was percent of secondary school students enrolled in non-government schools. This was based on the persistent perception within the wider community that in general non-government schools are advantageous in terms of schooling outcomes for their students relative to public schooling (Mukherjee 2002). The choice of secondary students rather than primary and secondary students was based on the assumption that parents view the choice of secondary school as more important for the life chances of their children than the choice of primary school.

The following variables were only available in a one off form and hence change over time could not be examined. However, each one does contribute evidence of the existence of an educational divide or polarisation within Brisbane. These variables include: percent that had used a computer at home in the week prior to the 2001 census by three age groups, 0-9 years, 10-14 years, and 15-19 years, as these cover the years of schooling; percent of households that used the internet at home in the week prior to the 2001 census and percent households who did not use the internet at any location at all doing the week prior to the census.

To further the statistical analysis the Brisbane SLAs were ranked on the SEIFA index and placed into five groups of approximately 30 SLAs each based on relative disadvantage. Hence, the first SEIFA group contained the 30 relatively worst off SLAs and so on until group five contained the most relatively advantaged SLAs in Brisbane.

Statistical operations

The nature of this research based as it was on looking for significant statistical associations meant that the analysis of data principally involved the use of correlation analysis. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was also carried out with a view to finding significant SEIFA group differences on a range of variables with the focus on the worst off group, that is SEIFA group one. A number of stepwise regressions were also conducted, although not shown here. The regressions examined the extent to which the SEIFA index could explain or predict the variance in the variable percent students in non-government schools for differing Brisbane suburbs.

Limitations

The study is limited by the following considerations. First, the lack of access to secondary school results meant that educational advantage had to be measured by enrolment in non-government schools. The census data relating to computer and internet use merely asks if these technologies were used in the week prior to the census, hence use need not have been for educational purposes. However, the time period did fall within a school week and at the very least indicates access to and use of information technology. It is also understood that correlation analysis does not imply causation between variables but rather the existence of a statistically significant relationship or association. The geographical nature of this research opens it to additional limitations that all aggregate areal studies face with respect to the ecological fallacy. In this regard it is accepted that the population within any geographic unit of study will contain a certain level of differing socio-economic characteristics and individual families who will act in different ways regarding choice of schools.

Results

Table 1 shows the average percent of secondary students enrolled in non-government schools for each of the five SEIFA groups over the time period of the study. As may be seen the pattern of secondary enrolments is most equally spread in 1986. By 2001 the gap in the percentage of students in private schools in groups one (the least advantaged) and five (the most advantaged) has widened considerably. Table 1 also shows the proportional change in enrolments for each SEIFA group for 1986-2001. As can been seen all groups displayed a proportional increase in access to private schools except for group one, the least advantaged, which displayed a proportional decline in the average percentage of students attending private schools.

SEIFA Group	Yearly Means				Proportional Change 1986-2001
	1986	1991	1996	2001	
1	30.3	36.3	24.9	27.3	-9.9
2	35.1	35.4	43.1	46.3	31.9
3	36.4	46.3	50.1	52.8	45.1
4	42.1	48.1	57.4	58.4	38.7
5	54.3	59.2	66.1	70.7	30.2
Ave[1]	39.5	45.0	48.4	51.5	30.3

[1] Average for all of Brisbane

Table 1
Yearly means and proportional change by SEIFA group of percent of secondary students enrolled in non-government schools for Brisbane 1986-2001

Table 2 shows access to various educational advantages by the 2001 SEIFA groups. As may be seen the averages for group one are consistently well below the averages of all the other groups except in the case of no use of internet in which case the higher average for group one still indicates relative disadvantage.

SEIFA Group	% who used computer at home in week prior to census by age group			% used internet at home	% did not use internet anywhere
	0-9 years	10-14 years	15-19 years		
1	28.6	62.0	59.7	16.4	66.9
2	34.5	75.3	72.8	21.1	56.0
3	36.5	78.8	76.5	23.3	50.8
4	40.7	82.1	80.1	23.6	46.6
5	46.0	88.4	87.5	26.4	40.2
Ave[1]	37.4	77.6	75.6	22.3	51.9

[1] Average for all of Brisbane

Table 2

Indicators of educational advantage by 2001 SEIFA group

Table 3 indicates a strengthening relationship or association between the measure of relative disadvantage and enrolment in private schools. With correlation analysis the closer the correlation value (r) is to +1 or -1 the stronger is the relationship between the two variables being examined. The correlation has risen from r = 0.50 in 1986 to r = 0.73 in 2001.This supports the hypothesis that enrolments in private schools are being increasingly associated with relative advantage. In other words the least advantaged households are possibly finding it increasingly difficult to access private education.

Independent variable	Correlation by census year			
	1986	1991	1996	2001
SEIFA Index	0.50**	0.53**	0.74**	0.73**

** $p < 0.01$

Table 3

Correlations between percent of secondary students enrolled in non-government schools by SEIFA score between 1986-2001

The strength of the educational divide in Brisbane is further evidenced in Table 4. This table examines the correlations between a number of educational indicators and the independent SEIFA variable. These correlations indicate strong associations between each of the educational indicators and socio-economic disadvantage. In

other words usage of information technology strongly increases with increasing relative advantage.

Indicators of educational advantage	SEIFA Index
% who used computer at home 0-9 years	0.78**
% who used computer at home 10-14 years	0.86**
% who used computer at home 15-19 years	0.83**
% who used internet at home	0.71**
% who did not use internet anywhere	-0.81**

** p <0.01

Table 4
Correlations between SEIFA 2001 and indicators of educational advantage

Further analyses were conducted using ANOVAs (not shown here) for the 2001 data set. Using the grouped suburbs according to relative disadvantage as the independent variable and the use of information technology as the five dependent variables. Statistically significant differences were found between the least advantaged group and each of the other groups in every instance. Hence, what emerges from the ANOVAs is a clear pattern of statistically significant lower access to information technology experienced by the least advantaged SEIFA group relative to each of the other groups.

The results of the stepwise regressions showed that the SEIFA index of relative disadvantage had become a stronger predictor of which type of school a child is likely to be attending. In 1986 the SEIFA index accounted for 25% of the variance of type of school a child was likely to be attending from any Brisbane suburb. However, in 2001 the SEIFA index accounted for 54% of the variance. Both of these regression models were significant at the $p<.001$ level. This result is not surprising given the strengthening statistical association between household socio-economic characteristics as expressed within the SEIFA index and type of school attended.

The consistency of these results is a feature of this research. Not only is there a consistent statistically significant association between relative disadvantage and educational disadvantage the most telling result has been the strength of these associations.

Discussion

This research has shown that, 'Geography matters as it never has before: a household's life chances are increasingly defined by the place in which it lives' (Gleeson 2002, p. 229). This is particularly true for the relatively worst off families and their children where increasing social polarisation is being accompanied by increasing educational polarisation. Indeed, as shown by the regression results reasonably confident predictions may now be made as to which type of school a particular secondary student will attend based on their postal address.

Social justice as well as educational theorists often stress that it is from the perspective of the least advantaged that the justness of a situation should be viewed (Rawls 1972, Campbell 1988, Connell 1993, Callinicos 2000). Accordingly, the implications of these research findings are examined within the context of the Rawlsian parameter of a just society as one which seeks to reduce economic inequality particularly by improving the situation of the least advantaged members of society. However, it is also argued that current trends to increasing educational polarisation have undesirable consequences for all children.

Public vs private schools

A careful reading of Table 1 shows a pronounced drop in the percentage of least advantaged families accessing non-government schools at the time of the 1996 census. This time period coincides with a rapid growth in inequality within Australia during the late 1980s and 1990s. In this context the Rawlsian condition of social justice has not been satisfied. Increasing inequality has clearly not been to the advantage of the worst off in terms of accessing private education. It is significant in this context to note that during the period 1983-1989 the then Labor government devoted considerable revenue and energy to reducing unemployment in Australia and hence promoting greater economic equality. Indeed, approximately 1.5 million jobs were created in that period (Bryson and Winter 1999, p. 22). It was at this time that the spread of children from all five SEIFA groupings attending non-government schools was most egalitarian.

Unemployment since peaking in the middle to late 1990s has steadily fallen however, the official figures do not reveal the extent of those who have given up looking for jobs nor those who suffer from under-employment. The falling unemployment rate also fails to reflect the type of jobs that are being created many of which will be low skill, low pay and casual (Argy 2003, p. 10). All of these factors could impact on the type of school families will be able to access. This appears to be the case with little change in terms of the least advantaged gaining access to private education between 1996 and 2001 despite improving employment outcomes. The only alternative

explanation is that for some reason the parents in the worst off group are going against the trend for all other groupings and choosing not to access private schooling.

Allied to the issue of choice is that of marketing and selection. Indeed, Rawls's difference principle which is primarily meant to apply to the basic societal structure and individual institutions within that structure such as education would call into question the justness of the marketing and selection practices of private schools. Rawls (2001) states:

> But since the difference principle applies to the basic structure, a deeper idea of reciprocity implicit in it is that social institutions are not to take advantage of contingencies of native endowment, or of initial social position, or of good or bad luck except in ways that benefit everyone, including the least favoured (2001, p. 124).

However, the opposite is the case. Whitty, Power and Halpin (1998, p. 117) argue private schools have a vested interest in 'creaming' off the most academically able students while selectively discarding those who may not provide the academic results the school is in search of. Such is the reality in a competitively market driven school system. Hence, private schools may be seen to be exploiters of students who in Rawls's view bring with them undeserved advantages from birth (innate ability), social class, or social environment. These students then receive a further undeserved advantage by being able to attend a prestigious, well resourced school, which confers further advantages upon them, and so the circle goes on. As a consequence the least advantaged students whose needs are sometimes the greatest are excluded from the sites of academic excellence and increasingly confined to the sites of poorly funded public education within poor neighbourhoods. Whitty, Power and Halpin (1998, p. 116) describe this excluded group as, '… those who are less able or have special educational needs, especially emotional and behavioural difficulties, as well as children from working-class backgrounds'.

Hence, the school system becomes polarised. Teese (2000, p. 208) argues that 'a school system differentiated into strong and weak sectors allows success to be concentrated in one and failure to be driven into the other'. Connell(1993, p. 15) condemns such a situation, 'An education that privileges one child over another is giving the privileged child a corrupted education, even as it gives him/her a social advantage'.

This research shows that in four of the five SEIFA groupings the percentage of students enrolled in non-government schools has been increasing. Why are an increasing number of parents prepared to pay in some cases large amounts of money

for a social good which may be accessed far more cheaply? Lareau (2003) takes the position that it is the middle class who are now beginning to feel the impacts of economic globalisation with its attendant down-sizing or economic rationalism (see also Pusey 2003). As such, many middle class families fear for the future of their children and as a consequence wish to provide them with every possible competitive edge with private schooling obviously one of these edges as alluded to earlier. This is particularly the case when the perception cultivated by private schools is that they are the bastions of the traditional academic institution providing for academic excellence of which passage through is the gateway to improved life chances (Teese and Polesel 2003, West 1998, Whitty, Power and Halpin 1998). However, Ball (2003, p. 33) contends that such a choice by these parents 'is not easy to defend on moral grounds, particularly as it involves an explicit awareness of, and in effect a condoning of, inequalities of provision' (see also Lee and Burkam 2002). Sturman (1997, p. 107) provides a second factor when he refers to the '… uninformed, yet well advertised belief that private schools are likely to be superior to government schools'. This coupled with the occasional government official slating government schools tend to lead to a crisis of confidence among parents in such schools (see for example, Maiden 2004). Argy (2003, p. 26) reports that, 'More and more, public schools are being seen as less desirable sites for education'.

The results of this research support the observation of Whitty, Power and Halpin (1998, p. 42) '…there is a growing body of empirical evidence that rather than benefiting the disadvantaged, the emphasis on parental choice (of school) is further disadvantaging those least able to compete in the market'. Additionally, so entrenched has this divide become that any attempt by government or others to reduce it will be met by an increasingly powerful lobby group in support of growing financial assistance to private schools (Marginson 2002, Martin and Fitzgerald 2000)

Geographical segregation and strengthening educational polarisation

This research also shows the least advantaged group significantly worse off in relation to computer and internet use which is likely to further deepen the educational divide (Argy 2003, Marginson 2002). The computer use findings indicate two major areas of concern. First is the wide gap in computer usage in the 0-9 year age group. Young children of the most advantaged families become familiar with computers at a far greater rate than their worse off counter-parts. This gives them a distinct educational head-start in the very influential early years of schooling. Second, the differing rate of usage in the 15-19 year age group is most likely a reflection of the early stages of what will become a strengthening polarising of life chances. The much lower percent for group one in this age group most likely reflects a lower school retention rate as well as the less likelihood of continuing to further education or to jobs involving computers. This research shows a similarly disadvantaged position for the least

advantaged in terms of internet access and use.

The results reported here correspond with other studies where households reporting high usage of the internet and computers at home also recorded above average levels of high income, an occupational profile heavily skewed towards managers, administrators and professionals, and had children attending non-government schools (ABS 2002b, 2002c, Gilbert 2000, Lee and Burkam 2002, Marginson 2002). In a workforce increasingly reliant on the use of information technology these results confirm the superior position of the advantaged households in these areas and indicate that they will maintain and in all probability widen their advantageous position.

Teaching cultural diversity

However, of more direct concern to intercultural educators is the suggestion that the increasing social polarisation occurring in our cities in fact works against goals of intercultural education. A number of social justice theorists have expressed concern at the growing levels of social polarisation they see developing within Western cities (Miller 1999, Phillips 1999). Given the widening geographic and lifestyle gaps between these polarising groups these theorists cannot see how any sense of common humanity and social cohesion may develop in such circumstances. Social solidarity, which is taken to refer to an absence of exclusion and the presence of mutual respect is eroded in a society of wide socio-economic disparities. According to Gleeson (2002, p. 231) solidarity does not mean uniformity but rather the 'type of social integrity that emerges from diversity and tolerance'. However, affluent communities reflect the attitudes of separatism, privatism and exclusion. (Argy 2003, Gleeson 2002).

Such developments raise important issues for democracy in Australia. The shift away from socially heterogeneous communities produces imbalances of perception and outlook. Meaningful human interaction at a personal and daily level is a key to ensuring tolerance and harmony in rapidly changing multicultural societies (Gleeson 2002, Miller 1999, Phillips 1999). How are middle class children in exclusive private schools to ever identify with and understand the least advantaged in their society when they may never have cause to interact with such individuals. Such students exist in an artificial school environment of homogeneity mixing only with students of similar backgrounds and experience. Such a situation is here now and if economic inequality is to remain unchecked or a low national priority it will only become worse.

Any casual look through the latest census data will show with monotonous regularity the complete absence for example of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the rich middle class suburbs of Brisbane. By contrast, Peel (2003) found in his study *The*

Lowest Rung that the parents in the least advantaged suburbs thought it quite amusing that educational authorities considered it important that schools place great emphasis on diversity. As these parents know, their children are exposed to diverse cultures every day in their local neighbourhoods and learn to get along together aided in part by a common battle against relative disadvantage. Ball's (2003) study of the rationalisations middle class parents gave concerning their choice of school is quite pertinent here. One parent voiced the concern of a number of Ball's respondents, 'I think it (public schooling) holds a lot of very good things for children, I wouldn't want them to be closeted away from the real world, I'd rather they went out and saw … what life was really like for a lot of people' (Ball 2003, p. 36).

Teaching for social justice

The literature dealing with teaching for social justice resonates with the importance of teaching both for greater cultural awareness as well as for greater economic equality (Cochran-Smith 1999, Greene 1998, Nieto 2000). In particular, teaching for social justice as the pursuit of greater economic equality would seem an even more pressing goal given the findings of this research and the emphasis governments now place on education as a means to achieve greater economic equality. To the more cynical, the recent push by governments to increase access to education and vocational training as a means to bring about a more equal society is seen as a convenient abrogation of government responsibility in bringing about greater levels of economic equality. This has the added advantage of permitting blame to be apportioned to educational providers and to the individual student when educational or employment outcomes are poor (Callinicos 2000). This situation is well captured by Lee and Burkam (2002, p. 81), '(governments) should not use one hand to blame schools for inadequately serving disadvantaged children when its social policies have helped to create these disadvantages – especially income disadvantages – with the other hand'.

A number of social justice theorists have noted the increasing evacuation of the Left from the pursuit of achieving greater economic equality (Callinicos 2000, Fraser 1997, Miller 1999, Phillips 1999). Issues of diversity, pluralism, multiculturalism and the positive affirmation of cultural difference have now taken the central position in discussion of issues of social justice (Callinicos 2000, Modood 1998).

Rawls (1972) is one of many social justice theorists (see for example, Callinicos 2000, Fraser 1997, Phillips 1999, Young 1990) who make convincing arguments that true political equality in terms of participation and equitable group representation is unachievable in a society containing gross economic inequalities. It would seem that despite the best intentions of intercultural educators the achievement of true equality and appreciation of diversity can make only limited impact in a grossly unequal world.

Within the educational sphere theorists (McLaren and Farahmandpur 2001, Taylor and Henry 2000) share similar sentiments in that contemporary educational policy and teaching appear too heavily inclined to emphasise difference and diversity. Taylor and Henry (2000, p. 13) echo many social justice theorists when they argue, 'Much of the work on difference fails to come to grips with poverty issues, and issues of redistribution and difference need to be pursued simultaneously in addressing injustice'. Similarly Modood (1998, p. 204) argues, 'An attack on certain kinds of racial inequality is only possible within a much more extensive commitment to equality and social justice'.

Fraser (1997, p. 13) seeks to theoretically separate these two components of social justice and hence speaks of 'the justice of redistribution' and the 'justice of difference or recognition' arguing that the remedy for each injustice is best found by reference to the appropriate social justice paradigm. However, Fraser is fully cognisant of the complex inter-relatedness of these two paradigms in achieving a socially just society.

Role of government

Given the persistent trends to widening inequality and social polarisation the findings of this research make at least two demands of government. First, a central criterion of distribution within the concept of social justice is need. In this regard a number of social justice theorists argue that the criterion of need should determine where public money goes in terms of public or private schools (Miller 1999, Pogge 1989). Government schools do not have the luxury of selectively choosing their students. They are bound to accept all students including the least advantaged. Rawls deems education a social good of the utmost importance and insists on fair equality of opportunity for all to access a good education. This may involve a government having to provide additional resources at the expense of the wealthier private schools to those schools whose needs are the greatest. Indeed, such a situation is called for by Rawls (1972, p. 100) in his principle of redress:

> In order to treat all persons equally, to provide genuine equality of opportunity, society must give more attention to those with fewer native assets and to those born into less favourable social positions. The idea is to redress the bias of contingencies in the direction of equality. In pursuit of this principle greater resources might be spent on the education of the less rather than the more intelligent, at least over a certain time of life, say the earlier years of school.

It is very difficult to see how wealthy private schools qualify for additional government support on the criteria of need ahead of numerous poor public schools. Indeed, Argy (2003) argues that inequitable school outcomes are likely to increase while current funding levels to private relative to pubic schools continue.

Second, undoubtedly a major cause of disadvantage and economic inequality is unemployment, low paid full time jobs and under-employment. Social justice demands that all those who wish to work should be able to do so and in the process be able to maintain a reasonable standard of living and be able to access key social goods as is implied by the rhetoric of choice. Responding to the growing gap in income levels is a challenge each society should see the need to confront through progressive programs of redistribution. Governments cannot absolve themselves from this issue by passing on to schools the task of correcting social ills such as unemployment or growing inequality (Marginson 2002). One of the key features of Rawls's theory of justice is the reduction of inequality so as to bring about equal opportunity in a very real sense. The life chances of children should not have to depend on the vagaries of a highly unequal labour market. Governments need to put in place policies which seek to equalise the opportunities for all children in terms of equitable school outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper has set out strong evidence that socio-economic equality does matter and must become a key aspect of teaching for social justice in both schools and teacher education. Intercultural education will not of itself overcome the social justice issues raised in this paper and indeed may find its task made all the more difficult because of the widening inequality which is occurring in society. In light of this Gilbert perhaps best sums up what is required of all educators:

> I fear that there IS a deepening divide in Australian education, and I would argue strongly that being ever vigilant of this divide, being focused on bridging the divide-is one of the most difficult challenges for education (2000, p. 31).

The economic rationalist polices of the Australian government have seen it increasingly withdraw from the provision of social goods. The rhetoric of 'choice' is given as the justification for government withdrawal from public provision of services and encouraging private provision. However, as has been shown by this research such a policy has merely created and entrenched an educational divide for our least advantaged students. 'Choice' means little to those unable to exercise it.

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