



## **Education's 'Inconvenient Truth': Part Two – The Middle Classes Have Too Many Friends in Education<sup>1</sup>**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This is the second part of an article about how schooling, long geared to the concerns and interests of the middle classes, remains so, and is becoming increasingly so in some ways. In Part One, published in the last issue, I drew a parallel with Al Gore's well-known film about climate change to argue for middle class advantage as education's 'inconvenient truth'. This is because while it is now pretty clear that education policies of recent decades have benefited the middle classes rather than the poor, there is at various points public, practitioner and policy denial of the problem. This denial reflects the self-interest of the middle classes and those who serve them. I focussed in Part One on the likely advantages provided by predominantly middle class school settings and how the middle classes have long targeted such schools for their children. This problem continues: indeed Part One showed how the New Zealand middle classes have been able to secure and in some ways improve their access to schools with a predominantly middle class mix under the zoning policies introduced in 2000.

In this second part of the article I explore the problem of middle class advantage from another angle and look at how those who work in the education sector in key roles help to perpetuate middle class advantage in education. It seems the middle class have too many friends in education, which of course is another way of saying that not enough educators are really defending the interests of the poor. I consider:

- how teachers and principals collude with the middle classes as they seek out advantaged settings for their children;
- how policymakers and politicians won't challenge the middle class for electoral reasons and so prefer to over-emphasise school-based solutions, especially better teaching and leadership, and
- how they are supported in this stance by academics in areas like school improvement and school leadership who act as textual apologists for the

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on my inaugural professorial lecture given at the University of Waikato, 2 March 2007.

non-reforming reforms which prop up middle class advantage in education.

Two caveats are necessary. The first is that it is recognised that not everyone is taking the problematic perspectives or acting in the ways I am highlighting. Indeed the situation on the ground in any particular school, office building or School of Education will be far more diverse, complex and contradictory than I can allow for here. But many educators do wittingly or unwittingly perpetuate middle class advantage, and at the risk of overgeneralising, we need to acknowledge and highlight that problem. The second caveat repeats a point made in Part One: that my account is not devoid of agency. Rather it is grounded in what Gerald Grace has called 'complex hope', which 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 (Grace, 2004). Hence I will also consider how we might start to do things differently, how the orientation of schooling to the middle classes might be reduced.

## **TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS**

Teachers and principals can advantage the middle class in lots of ways in the day to day life of schools: in their use of language, in what they choose to teach about and assess, in their support for segregated and stratified school programmes, in their assumptions about student behaviours and world views, the so-called 'hidden curriculum' and so on. But again let's return to the basic issue of access to socially advantaged and well-resourced school settings. A key issue is simply where teachers and principals choose to work and hence take their own human resources. In the 1950s Howard Becker (Becker, 1952) showed that the career paths of Chicago teachers tended to take them from schools in working class areas to those in leafier suburbs where they tended to stay - horizontal rather than vertical mobility if you like. The effect of this was that middle class schools were likely to have more experienced teachers and fewer problems recruiting teachers than schools in low socio-economic areas. Garth Ritchie (Ritchie, 2004) has shown a similar pattern here in New Zealand 50 years later. Teachers tend to move to higher socio-economic schools in the first few years of their teaching lives and except when they are getting close to retirement, their subsequent moves are also more likely to be to higher than lower socio-economic schools. Meanwhile the lowest decile schools are those with a greatest turnover of teachers. There are problems with policy in this area too as posts and promotions have often not been as secure in low socioeconomic schools if they have declining rolls. And of course principals get paid more by size of school and the large schools tend to be high decile schools.

There is also much evidence that teachers and principals continue to pursue a quiet life and higher status once they get into high socio-economic schools by trying to limit their intake to middle class students. So this is the other side to the ways zones are drawn up to exclude low socio-economic areas noted earlier – it is school staff and no doubt boards of trustees who are doing that. The 'Smithfield' research on educational markets in New Zealand in the 1990s showed a significant relationship between socio-economic status and probability of being accepted by a high decile school, even after controlling for achievement (Lauder

et al., 1999). And what are we to make of the rigour with which the zones of high status schools are being policed? In 2006 Auckland Grammar employed a full-time enrolments registrar and cancelled the enrolments of 51 students it deemed to be 'zone cheats' because their families had moved out of the school zone whilst their child was attending (Trevett, 2006). It then came to light that a number of other high decile Auckland school had been carrying out early morning door knocks to flush out 'zone cheats' by checking to see if families really were living at the addresses claimed on enrolment forms (Woulfe, 2006). In taking such actions schools are being overzealous in interpreting the zoning legislation, for instance the Ministry of Education upheld 20 out of 45 appeals against Auckland Grammar's action. But it does have the effect of maintaining a socially privileged intake by more rigorously excluding those who cannot afford to live in zone.

Also relevant is the somewhat disingenuous way Catholic and private schools market themselves in New Zealand which is very much a case of denying that high socio-economic schools offer positional advantage. This is because the celebratory websites of the New Zealand Catholic Education Office and the Independent Schools of New Zealand and the equally celebratory discourses of their key spokespeople (CEO Brother Pat Lynch and Joy Quigley respectively) continually imply that the reasons people choose such schools over the state system are for their religious or private character. Of course people who send their children to Catholic and private schools are not immune from the trends I have been describing and such schools will not be popular unless they are also predominantly middle class.

It may be difficult to demonstrate this in the case of private schools which are, by their very nature, unlikely to be working class although we do know that schemes like the 'Assisted Places' scheme in the UK or the 'Targeted Individual Entitlement' scheme here in New Zealand which were supposed to provide free places at private schools for working class children more often than not got taken up by children from cash-strapped middle class families, for instance families where the parents had separated (Whitty et. al., 1998). But we can certainly see it in the Catholic school system where the popular schools with enrolment schemes are again high decile schools. I note my old school, St Bernard's College in Lower Hutt is now a decile 5 school with more than 50% Maori and Pasifika students. In my view that school could exude all the religious character it wanted but would be unlikely to become particularly sought after by middle class Catholic families. It may not even be a consideration. Instead middle class Catholic families would probably want their boys to attend decile 9, predominantly Pakeha St Patrick's College further up the Hutt Valley which is described on its website as "the premier Catholic boys boarding and day school of New Zealand". According to the website it is also a school where the staff are "always very happy to talk...about how you can improve your young man's chances of attending."

## **POLITICIANS AND POLICYMAKERS**

Politicians and policymakers do not typically dwell on the kinds of persistent pressures towards middle class advantage in education this article has raised either. For instance this is what the Minister of Education recently had to say about zoning:

No one, including the National Party, has been able to improve on the current school zoning system.

(Steve Maharey, quoted in Grunwell, 2007)

It is hardly a rigorous defence. What's crucial to appreciate here is that education policy, like other policy, is shaped and bounded by electoral pressures and doing anything much about middle class advantage in education is probably often regarded as unfeasible in electoral terms. Politicians are generally looking more for education policy which will appeal to the middle classes (which are also more likely to vote than families in poverty) than policy which will make the government more unpopular. New Zealand research on this is scarce but the point comes through loud and clear in analyses of English education policy (e.g., Hatcher, 1998; McCaig, 2000). So although we know the policymaking process is complex, we should not forget that votes count, and that because of this, politicians and policymakers are likely to be very sensitive to public opinion, including that which is class-related. Nevertheless by failing to raise middle class advantage in education as an issue, politicians and policymakers help it to be hegemonic, that is to appear natural and how the world should be. And so we have a society where most people probably see putting their child in a high socio-economic school as value-free. In England, more class conscious, it's not quite the same and there are newspaper articles about the ethical dilemmas of school choice and howls of protest in the media whenever prominent Labour politicians put their children in private schools.

What politicians and policymakers much prefer to talk about is how schools can pull up the low achievement associated with child poverty through better teaching and leadership. In England under New Labour this has led to policy discourses of school improvement whereas in New Zealand the discourses have been broader, around effective or quality teaching and 'quality providers' but also significantly around family and community engagement in education (Thrupp, 2005b). And in some ways all this is fair enough, most educators would agree that how well teachers and principals teach and lead and how well they relate to the communities their schools serve makes a difference. The problem comes when school-based solutions are overplayed, turned from what Jean Anyon (Anyon, 1997) has called 'small victories', into what she calls 'large victories' which are seen to provide the answer to educational and social inequalities.

This points up another problem closer to home, that academics promoting small victories can actively distract from the larger agenda of eliminating poverty and addressing middle class advantage.

## **EDUCATION ACADEMICS**

Over the course of my academic career my critique of neo-liberal education policy has gradually been matched by a critique of the politics of education research and scholarship, particularly in the areas of school effectiveness, school improvement, school change and school leadership. This is because I gradually became aware that while many of us were writing with concern about the inequitable effects of markets, managerialism and performativity – neoliberal policy technologies as

Stephen Ball calls them – others, overwhelmingly in the areas mentioned above, were more busy being on-message and finding ways to help schools come to terms with those policy technologies. These academics have gained status and influence from being seen as policy-relevant and there is, no doubt, a certain seductiveness about this situation for the researchers involved. Indeed these areas have furnished many of the most influential policy entrepreneurs working in the area of school reform.

Ball (2006) highlights the career of Michael Barber, now Sir Michael Barber. Once professor of school improvement at London's Institute of Education, he became Head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit in the DfES and then Head of the No. 10 Delivery Unit. In 2005 he became an 'expert principal' in McKinsey and Company, a multi-national management consultancy company. He recently undertook a world policy tour where he addressed policy audiences on the necessary strategies for creating 'world class' education systems, directly promoting those neo-liberal policy technologies of markets, managerialism and performativity. This advice comes at a hefty price – a recent Canberra event in which he 'starred' cost participants almost \$5000 a head for conference, full-day tutorial and a gala dinner. Barber is really in a league of his own but people like Michael Fullan and Brian Caldwell, David Reynolds, Geoff Southworth, Louise Stoll and David Hopkins, all professors of education, all do lots of consultancy and reform work within governments. Some of their websites illustrate how much some of them make an industry of themselves. Visitors to Michael Fullan's website ([www.michaelfullan.ca](http://www.michaelfullan.ca)) can download logos and photos of him. Brian Caldwell's company called 'Educational Transformations' has similarly entrepreneurial overtones.

In my book with Rob Willmott (Thrupp & Willmott, 2003) we critiqued how educational management writers often act to textually apologise for neo-liberal reform in education. Some writers we described as 'overt apologists' who are uncritically supportive of neo-liberal and managerial reform and barely acknowledge the social justice concerns associated with it. Others we described as 'subtle apologists' who indicate more concern about the context of reform and social inequality but still provide support to market and managerial education either because their critique is insufficiently critical or not emphasised enough within their overall account to provide any serious challenge. What none of these academics offer is textual dissent that is seriously concerned with challenging neo-liberal policy and structural inequality. Only a few writers have this as their focus. Now to bring this back to the problem of middle class advantage, what has allowed such academics to get away with what they do is that they have largely ignored the class and ethnic context of schooling, indeed as Roger Slee and Gaby Weiner (Slee & Weiner, 1998) have put it, social context has been "bleached out of their analytic frame". Such academics have instead worked to the tenets of the New Public Management which holds that social change can be engineered through 'one size fits all' organisational change. Yet of course wherever discussion of local context raises social complexity and inequality, NPM assumptions are revealed as simplistic. Effective leadership and teaching in one local context is just not the same as effective leadership and teaching in another. A point I have made repeatedly over the years. Partly in response to criticism from myself and others there is now some increasing concern to recognise and understand context, but considerable room for further development (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006).

## REINING IN MIDDLE CLASS ADVANTAGE

How might we start to do things differently, how might middle class advantage be reined in somewhat? Starting with the academic work I have just been mentioning, one key strategy for school improvement and leadership is to develop contextualised frameworks that highlight the differences and inequalities between schools rather than downplay them. Better contextualised work could give rise to; fairer evaluation of school performance and distribution of resources, the provision of more appropriate advice and support to schools in less favourable contexts and better responses to the needs of marginalised school populations. It will also lead to findings and accounts which are harder to misuse in the policy process because they are too complex and nuanced to support managerial reform: there could be no more lists of simplistic effectiveness factors or generic solutions to the problems faced by schools (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006).

Another things academics can do is help to keep New Zealand insulated from the worst excesses of neo-liberal education policy elsewhere because of the strong middle class bias inherent in that policy. For instance at the moment New Zealand's version of target-setting is 'soft-touch' compared to the US or England. Targets are not closely linked to national testing because to date the National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) has been able to satisfy the needs of policymakers. But a populist focus on student standards or even on the so-called 'long tail of achievement in New Zealand schools' could easily lead to a much tougher target setting and testing regime. We should avoid this at all costs when the evidence from England and the US is that this will intensify middle class advantage not diminish it. We also need to be careful about promoting international networks for practitioners. For instance last year saw the New Zealand launch of iNET. iNET is the international arm of England's Specialist Schools and Academies Trust which is a government quango involved in promoting performativity and privatisation in the UK schools sector. It is not what New Zealand should be getting hooked up with. To screen such unhelpful international influences we need to tap into critiques of education policy and practice in 'lending' countries. We also need to be really clear about what is distinctive about New Zealand education and what is worth holding on to here.

Moving to politicians and policymakers, we can accept they are caught by electoral pressures but they can help both in terms of policy and discourse. First the Ministry of Education should not delay in taking more control of zoning by taking it out of the hands of schools. This will be an unpopular move with some schools but will probably just be more in line with the public perception of how zoning works now anyway. Second, the government could carefully open up public debate about the social costs of such a segregated education system and also be more honest with teachers and the public about the limits of school-based interventions. The aim here would be create a climate of public and professional opinion which would support government intervention to draw up zones with a view to preventing school segregation adding to residential segregation. Better zoning would not address residential segregation but other policy has to be involved here, for instance making sure all new developments have an element of social housing, as in parts of England now.

What teachers and principals serving the middle class in high decile schools can do is be honest in their public statements about the way in which their schools gain advantage from their high socio-economic intakes. It is always

refreshing to hear the headteachers or principals of middle class schools publicly comment, as they occasionally do, that 'yes, our students did do well in such and such an exam/scholarship/competition but you would expect that with our intake.' In this way teachers and school leaders at advantaged schools can refuse to buy into the view that less popular schools are 'bad' schools. They can also help by building co-operative rather than competitive relationships with other schools, by ensuring that their own practices are the least selective or exclusionary possible, as well as by supporting moves to provide additional resources to schools which need them most. However tight funding is getting across the schools sector as a whole, it is disturbing to see principals of high decile schools complaining in the media about the unfairness of extra funding going to low socio-economic schools. This shows a complete disregard for the myriad of ways their own schools gain advantage from the nature of their intakes, some of which can be offset by extra funding to low socio-economic schools and where that's possible it should be happening.

## **CONCLUSION**

The way the education system perpetuates middle class advantage is a central problem in our society and one which intersects with both a host of high profile problems within the sector (such as Maori underachievement and the resourcing of schools) as well as class inequalities in other sectors (such as housing and health). It is also an uncomfortable problem – an inconvenient truth – for the many of us who as parents, teachers, principals, policymakers or academics – benefit from the status quo. Yet as the social inequalities within New Zealand society become starker, middle class advantage in education is becoming a more obvious truth here. This in turn starts to pose a clearer choice for those of us who benefit - whether to ignore the social justice issues or to pursue a fairer deal for all children. Middle class advantage may well be a difficult issue to address but, as indicated above, some kinds of education policy and practice could make a difference.

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