Education's 'Inconvenient Truth': Part One – Persistent Middle Class Advantage[1]

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INTRODUCTION

As a policy sociologist I have long been drawn to uncomfortable questions about whose interests are really being served in and through education (Thrupp, 1999a). I've been interested in how developments in education policy and practice can lead to greater social inequalities and how seemingly worthwhile policies and practices can be undone by other developments (Thrupp, 1999b). In recent years I've also increasingly turned the spotlight back on us as academics and researchers, to consider the politics of our own work and ask awkward questions about whether we are part of the problem too (Thrupp & Willmott, 2003). And, to some extent, I've begun to take up that difficult challenge which is always being put to critical scholars, you know, 'so what's the alternative?' (Thrupp, 2005).

This two–part article is about how schooling, long geared to the concerns and interests of the middle classes, remains so, and is even increasingly so in some ways. I see this as an 'inconvenient truth' in several senses. First, while it is now pretty clear that the neoliberal policies of the 1980s and 1990s benefited the middle classes rather than the poor in education, and that pattern largely continues despite the 'third way' rhetoric of this decade (Codd & Sullivan, 2005; Tomlinson, 2005), there is at various points public, practitioner and policy denial of the problem. This is partly because a lot of policy which advantages the educational prospects of the middle class occurs outside education, for instance in housing, and so people in the education sector tend not to look at it. Meanwhile, within education, concern about growing class inequalities comes up against competing and rather more celebratory discourses such as school improvement, educational leadership and teacher quality which also distract from the problem. In these ways increasing middle class advantage becomes something not mentioned (an 'elephant in the staffroom' if you like).

Second, middle class advantage is not discussed much because of the self-interest the phrase 'inconvenient truth' also implies. It is much easier to talk in a disconnected way about an underclass, than to see ourselves creating the educational problems of the poor. Middle class self-interest variously includes:

[1] This article is based on my inaugural professorial lecture given at the University of Waikato, March 2, 2007.

- Seeing middle class children get advantaged which is in our interests as middle class parents if we want them to 'do well'*;*
- helping middle class children get into our schools and make good progress which, for reasons discussed shortly, can be in our interests as teachers and principals if we want to be seen as successful practitioners; and,
- claiming to have solutions to working class disadvantage in education which do not threaten middle class advantage. Promoting these solutions can be in our interests as education policymakers and researchers if we want status and career rewards.

Third, 'An inconvenient truth' is also of course the title of Al Gore's recent film about climate change and an analogy we could draw there is that while New Zealand education policy may be a little more benign than elsewhere at present, there is a distinct likelihood that sooner or later, with a change of government, or even a change of Minister, we could be engulfed by international trends which will make things a whole lot worse.

But fourth, and again like climate change, we shouldn't just sit on our hands. There are things which can be done if we can summon up the political will to do them.

Central to my argument are the concepts of social class and the middle class. The development of post modernist and post structuralist theory over the 80s and 90s led to the wholesale neglect of class. Yet while post modernist and post structuralist theory brought important insights, it distracted from the fact that economic and social inequalities have been growing in many countries. This is certainly the case for New Zealand over the 1980s and 90s, only the United States had a larger increase in wage inequality (Glennerster, Hills, Piachaud & Webb, 2004). Disparities in New Zealand living standards have also continued to increase over this decade largely because sole parents, those reliant on income-tested benefits, and large families have seen a reduction in living standards (Jensen, Krishnan, Hodgson, Sathiyandra & Templeton, 2006).

The new concern with social class, as seen for instance in the work of Mike Savage (Savage, 2000) and Fiona Devine (Devine, Savage, Crompton & Scott, 2005) understands class in more subtle and more dynamic ways than in the past, allowing for fractions within classes and for a wider range of class practices and identities. Drawing especially on the theoretical tools provided by the late Pierre Bourdieu, a number of academics have been carrying this development into education (e.g., Ball, 2003; Reay, 2006; Vincent & Ball, 2006). Diane Reay (2006) has recently pointed to the crucial relevance of class in education:

> Social class remains the one educational problem that comes back to haunt English education again and again and again, the area of educational inequality on which education policy has had virtually no impact.
>
> (p.304)

Another feature of the new emphasis on class in education has been attention to the practices and strategies of the middle classes. Ball (2003: 5) notes that what is of particular interest about the middle class is 'how their actions produce or contribute to the perpetuation, inscription and reinvention of social inequalities both old and new'. Also of interest is how the middle class 'fails to register the social implications of its routine actions' (Savage, 2000: 159). Both of these are key themes in this article.

In New Zealand, as elsewhere, class intersects with ethnicity. Pakeha and Asian families are much more likely to be middle class than Māori or Pasifika families, although both of the latter groups do have a middle class of course. Māori are also part of the class structure and yet class doesn't get much mention in Māori discourses. The reasons for this are probably as much political as intellectual in that Māoridom has needed to contest any perspective which threatens to view Māori as just another disadvantaged group rather than having a special claim on distributive justice because of the Treaty of Waitangi (Sharp, 1990). Yet both ethnic and class cultures count and hopefully one day when Māori are having to fight their corner less we will see work which can genuinely bring together theory and research across these two areas.

There are many ways to talk about persistent middle class advantage in education, for instance:

- family resources, relationships between parents and schools and middle class dominance of school governance (boards of trustees for instance). 'Home Advantage' as Annette Lareau (1989) puts it;
- class biases in the curriculum and the need for what Bob Connell (1994) has called 'Curricula Justice';
- middle class resistance to a shift from summative to more formative approaches to assessment which has, for example, led to the take up of a qualification from the United Kingdom, the Cambridge exam, in about 40 high decile schools;
- how within schools the perfomative policies which continue to gather steam in education can favour the middle class in terms of them accessing a more engaging and demanding curriculum. This is one of those areas where we may have some problems in New Zealand but a much more disturbing future is observable overseas, for instance the commodifying effects of New Labour's regime of testing and target-setting in schools in England (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000); and,
- how the middle class access predominantly middle class school settings and the likely advantages that those kinds of school contexts bring.

It is the last of these which is the focus of Part One of this article. Here I consider how even in the context of zoning the New Zealand middle classes have been able to secure and in some ways improve their access to schools with a predominantly high socio-economic mix. In the second part of the article, to be published in the next issue, I explore the problem from another angle and argue that 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. None of this is truly inevitable however. My account 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, the second part of the article concludes by looking at how we might start to do things differently, how the orientation of schooling to the middle classes might be reduced.

EDUCATION AS A POSITIONAL GOOD

Why are predominantly middle class, socially advantaged school settings – in New Zealand those decile 8, 9, 10 schools – popular with most parents and especially middle class parents? In part the preference for those sorts of schools reflect the ideological assumption of a relationship between high social status and quality but it also results from the importance of predominantly middle class schooling as a means of social reproduction or mobility. By keeping out children from poorer families, predominantly middle class schools serve parents seeking relative advantage, that is, seeking a way to advantage their child's future prospects compared to others. Put another way, predominantly middle class schooling is a *positional good.* Simon Marginson defines positional goods in education as 'places in education which provide students with relative advantage in the competition for jobs, income, social standing and prestige' (Marginson, 1997: 38). The key point about positional goods is that they are scarce in absolute terms so that only some people can benefit from them. If they were available to all they would lose the relative advantages they bring and hence their positional value. The fact that predominantly middle class schools are seen to offer positional advantage helps to explain why such schools are nearly always more popular than low socio-economic schools which have little positional value almost irrespective of what they do.

Although the class intuition of parents about the superiority of predominantly middle class schools may be considered unfair to staff and students in low socio-economic schools, it is not necessarily irrational. Predominantly middle class schools really may be advantageous to attend because they provide their pupils with better pathways to tertiary institutions, better access to networks of power and information in the future labour market (the 'old school tie'), and extra resources. As well, there may also be compositional or 'school mix' effects which push up student achievement in predominantly middle class schools because of peer group, instructional and organisational advantages that accrue to students who attend those schools over those going to lower socio-economic schools (Thrupp, 1999a). The key point to grasp is that these advantages of middle class schools are probably school-based but not school-caused, they needn't reflect better teaching and management *per se* but probably stem directly from the other students in the school through peer group processes or stem from the way school policies and practices of many kinds are supported by high levels of student compliance, motivation and 'ability' which are in turn class-related. It's also important to say that the existence and size of compositional effects remains a matter of some debate (Thrupp, Lauder & Robinson, 2002).

PSEUDO-ZONING

What is quite clear, however, is that given half a chance the middle classes will typically cluster together residentially, group their children together in predominantly middle class schools and give them some sort of advantaged education by excluding the poor. Historical analyses by Gary McCulloch (1990, 1991) shows this happening in New Zealand over many decades and a market model intensifying it (see also Thrupp, 2007) . So what has the Labour government in New Zealand done to prevent this? In 1999 Labour seemed to have learnt the lessons of the previous decade about the costs of a market model in education. Its pre-election statements expressed concern about intensifying inequalities between what it called winner and loser schools:

> Disparities between schools levels of resourcing are increasing as the 'market model' is applied blindly. Because schools are expected to raise more and more of the funds needed locally, schools in poorer areas are penalised … Schools are being divided into winners and losers according to their ability to fund the technology and other resources needed to provide high quality education. High quality education also requires high quality teachers. Unfortunately the more schools become defined as winners or losers, the more difficulty some schools have attracting and retaining quality staff.
>
> (New Zealand Labour Party, 1999: 4)

The key policy response outlined by Labour prior to the 1999 election was the reintroduction of zoning to prevent over-subscribed state schools picking off middle class students from the catchments of poorer, less popular schools and indeed this is what they did when elected by way of the Education Amendment Act (2000). On the face of it this seemed to be Labour making a substantial move away from the market back to its 1989 policies of over-subscribed schools having home zones and balloting for out of zone enrolments; policies which had been dropped by National in 1991 as it moved to increase market competition between schools. Labour's new policies seem to provide some protection to lower socio-economic schools from having their high socio-economic students creamed off by more popular schools and also to students from poorer families to attend over-subscribed schools because all students living in-zone have the right to attend their local school.

Yet school zones are not what they used to be. They are now effectively drawn up by schools rather than Government and the Ministry of Education has only limited control over them. The working definition used is simply that a school has to be 'reasonably convenient' for its students; that is, a school that, taking into account a range of factors, a reasonable person would judge to be reasonably convenient. It has yet to be tested in law and can still allow schools to target middle class students. Research into primary school zoning in Christchurch has shown that in the absence of government control many schools have been drawing up their zones in convoluted ways to 'bypass more deprived but closer areas in favour of further but wealthier suburbs' (Pearce & Gordon, forthcoming). Moreover, Pearce and Gordon point out that unlike the

old Department of Education school zones, zones can now overlap, making them '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'. So, New Zealand may have zoning again but it has a new fluidity which allows middle class schools and families to seek each other out and cut out areas of poorer housing. Such pseudo-zones do not protect low socio-economic schools from having students creamed off by more popular higher socio-economic schools. Nor do they prevent poor families being cut out of a school's zone.

SELECTION BY MORTGAGE

What can also be said with confidence is that living in-zone is now the only sure way for children to be enrolled in a popular school, and any pockets of low cost housing suitable for poorer families in the zones of popular schools will rarely stay that way for long. In New Zealand, debate about the effect of being in the zone of popular schools on the affordability of house prices ('selection by mortgage') has tended to revolve around Auckland's 'Grammar Zone' where houses on different sides of the same street can have $100,000 between them depending on whether they are in the zone or not (see Richardson, 2006). Although there has been no New Zealand research on the relationship between school zones and housing prices, it seems likely from United Kingdom research (Cheshire, 2007) that only New Zealand's most popular schools would command such a significant premium. Nevertheless, in other parts of Auckland and other New Zealand cities, it is not uncommon for being in the zone of a popular high socio-economic school to make a difference to asking price and to feature in advertising.

We need to see the interaction of education with what's happening in other sectors such as housing to understand the growth of social inequalities in education. New Zealand has been going through a housing boom, some of it due to immigration but a lot of it driven by middle class baby boomers investing in their own homes and in rental properties as a means of saving for their retirements with the neo-liberal shrinking of the state. Schooling plays an important role in this investment activity because, for the same reasons houses in the zones of popular schools are unaffordable, they are secure investments and no doubt part of how many in the middle class maintain and improve their financial resources. In the same study mentioned earlier, Pearce and Gordon (forthcoming) note that the zones of Christchurch secondary schools serving wealthier areas of the city have not changed for many years (the schools all chose to retain geographic zones when they had oversubscribed status in the 1990s). For Pearce and Gordon this raises the unresearched question whether these non-changing zones and the wealth of the communities have interacted to compound inequalities between suburbs.

Also of relevance is how zoning in an era of sky-high house prices is recasting the value of private schooling as a positional good. Private schooling is increasingly being taken up by middle class parents who want a 'top education' but are locked out of the zones of the most popular state schools because of the cost of buying a house in zone (Grunwell, 2007). To use the example Grunwell provides, it becomes financially more attractive to live in Titirangi with annual mortgage repayments of $20,000 and school fees of

$14,000 than to live in Remuera with annual mortgage repayments of over $40,000 (unless a family has more than one child of course). What this suggests is that while private provision may be increasing, up from 3.5% of the school population in 2000 to 4% in 2007, it is not necessarily the positional good it was before the new zoning policies although this depends on the specific private school concerned.

Another issue is the disadvantages for poorer families created by middle class investment in rental properties. Investment activity from middle class households has contributed to the poorest 30% of households becoming dependent on the whim of their landlord as more and more people have to rent. Making matters worse, in the 1990s over 13,000 state houses were sold off and market rents introduced. This reduced the total stock of low-cost housing available, leading to huge waiting lists even after income-related rents were reintroduced in 1999. Overcrowded and insecure housing creates educational disadvantages for the poor, especially transience between schools associated with 'househopping' and absence from school due to health issues (Gilbert, 2005). This is one of those areas where the middle classes are securing their advantaged futures at the fairly obvious but often unacknowledged expense of the poor. It is also a good illustration of how inequalities being generated in other sectors affect education in important ways but are off the radar for many of us in the education sector.

Also, outside of education but impacting strongly on it, is the area of family assistance and benefits. This relates to the problem of school resourcing which is partly a vexed issue because all schools are struggling as Government funding has been decreasing as a percentage of school income over recent years, while 'local fundraising' (school fees/ 'voluntary donations', fundraising and foreign fee-payers) has increased significantly.

Table 1: Government Funding as a Percentage of School Income

	1995	**2005**
Primary	90.5%	88.9%
Secondary	85.8%	82.8%

Table 2: Local Fundraising Per Child

	1999	**2005**
Primary (per child)	$301	$474
Secondary (per child)	$750	$987

(Quality Public Education Coalition, 2006)

School resourcing is also a vexed issue, however, because while the government does provide equity funding of around $250m spread over 15 programmes and low decile schools get more of this funding than high decile schools, it is not clear that the former get nearly enough to compensate for the

poverty-related issues they face compared to the advantages brought by the student intake in high decile schools, nor their inability to raise local money. For instance, at Insoll Avenue school, a Decile 1 primary school in Hamilton, the donation is only $10 a term but it is only collected from about 5% of parents. And yet, low decile schools like Insoll Avenue don't necessarily look under-resourced, they often have well-maintained buildings and classrooms and playground equipment. Because of this the New Zealand situation differs from the United Kingdom and especially the United States where poor schools are often under-resourced in more obvious ways. Yet huge amounts of extra staffing and other resourcing would need to flow towards low socio-economic schools to start to seriously offset the effects of poverty on children's learning. This would be electorally unacceptable; while all schools are needing to find more money, and while the middle class are so easily able to avoid low socio-economic schools, most middle class people have no contact with them at all.

It is also the case that policy doesn't join up on these matters. The Ministry of Social Development *New Zealand Living Standards Report* mentioned earlier (Jensen *et al*., 2006) showed that the proportion of children experiencing significant or severe hardship had increased from 18 to 26% between 2000 and 2004. The children experiencing the worst decline in living standards over this time were mainly in families supported by benefits, with an overrepresentation of Māori and Pasifika families. The government's stance on this is that the Working with Families package and the promotion of a work ethic will fix the problem. However, Susan St John of the Child Poverty Action Group has argued 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 (St John, 2006). If we were to take seriously in education this increasing gap between the 'in work' and 'not in work' we would be providing equity funding to schools according to the proportion of parents who are in receipt of a benefit as this approach would be better linked to an understanding of how poverty actually works than the current decile approach based on census mesh blocks which is at best a very general approach to recognising poverty.

CONCLUSION TO PART ONE

It is apparent that in the context of zoning the New Zealand middle classes have been able to secure and in some ways improve their access to schools with a predominantly high socio-economic mix. This may be considered unsurprising given the positional nature of schooling highlighted here. It may also be considered unsurprising when the available evidence from earlier times (the post-war social-democratic period and the 1990s when quasi-market policies were embraced in New Zealand) also shows New Zealand's middle classes seeking and being successful in finding ways to educate their children in socially advantaged schools but doing this in different ways depending on the policy of the day (Thrupp, 2007). Yet neither theory nor the historical record makes such middle class advantage acceptable. It really is education's inconvenient truth and something needs to be done about it.

At a personal level such middle class advantage raises an ethical challenge for all of us who are middle class parents: to recognise the line to be drawn between advantaging our own children and doing this at the expense of other people's children (Kohn, 1998). For, as John Dewey said a century ago, '[W]hat the best and wisest parent wants for his [sic] own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely: acted upon, it destroys our democracy' (Dewey, 1902: 3). That challenge not to harm other people's children becomes a whole lot harder once we acknowledge that school choice is not value-free: that enrolling our own children in predominantly middle class schools has real implications for the schooling and subsequent life chances experienced by the children who attend the low socio-economic schools which this action creates.

Realistically, for many middle class parents the concern to advantage their own children will be overwhelming. For this reason we should remember that socially advantaged urban schools have long participated enthusiastically in the project of creating middle class advantage and turn our attention to how those who work in the education sector in key roles help to perpetuate middle class advantage in education. Part Two of this article will therefore 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 non-reforming reforms which prop up middle class advantage in education. Part Two will also consider what can be done to begin to rein in middle class advantage in education.

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