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**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

***School of Education***

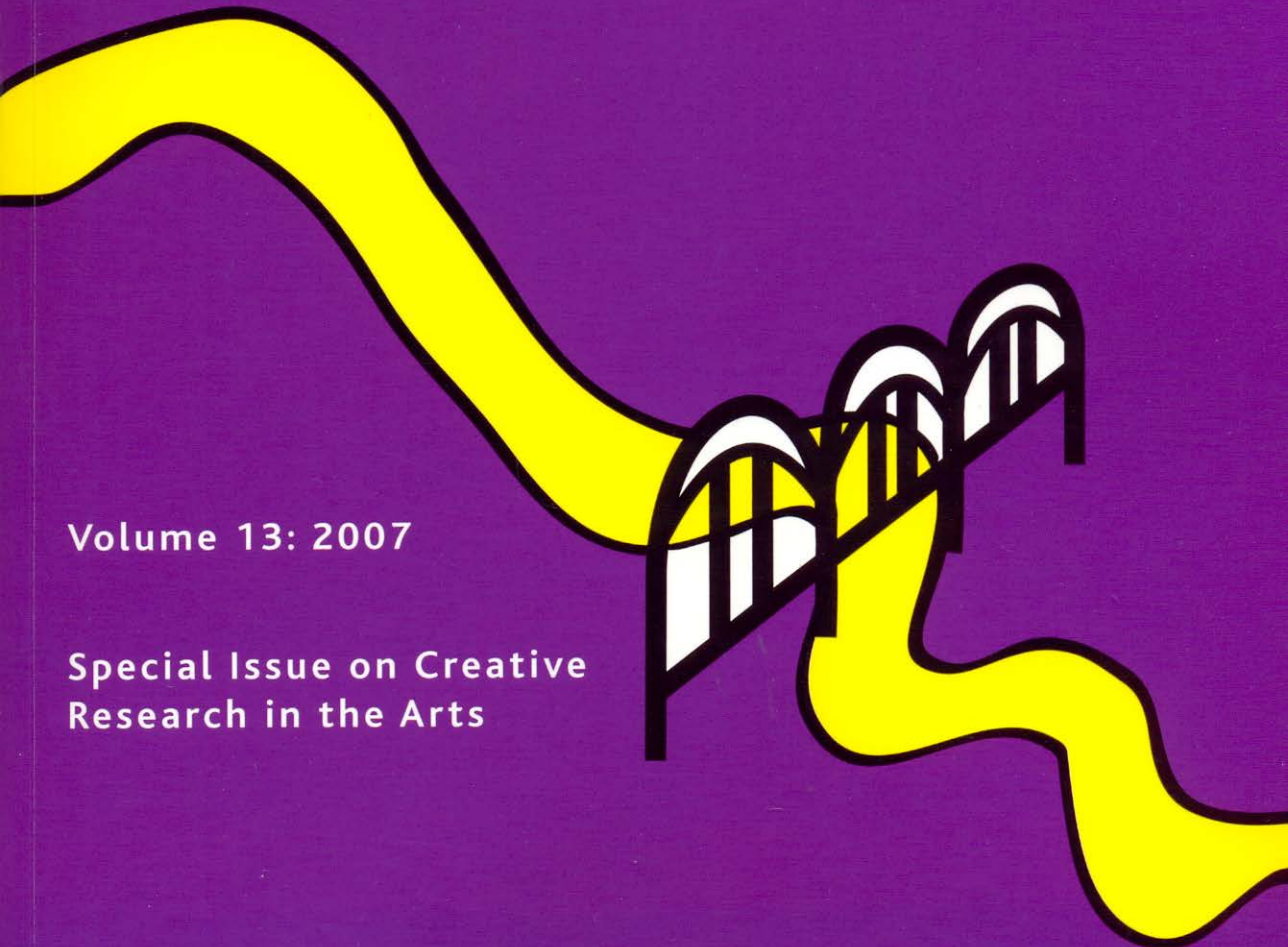
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Special Issue on Creative  
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# **EDUCATION'S 'INCONVENIENT TRUTH': PERSISTENT MIDDLE CLASS ADVANTAGE<sup>1</sup>**

**MARTIN THRUPP**

*School of Education, University of Waikato*

Tihei mauri ora  
Kia hiwa rā, kia hiwa rā  
Moe araara ki te matahi tuna  
Moe araara ki te matahi taua  
Ka tiri tiria, ka rearearia  
a tama tū ki tōna hiwa rā  
Kia hiwa rā, kia hiwa rā  
Kia hiwa rā i tēnei tuku  
Kia hiwa rā i tērā tuku  
Kei whakapurua koe ki te toto  
Papaki tū ana te tai ki te Reinga  
Eke Panuku, Eke Tangaroa!  
Hui e, Taiki e!  
Tihei mauri ora.

E ngā hoa kua huihui mai nei, ki roto i tēnei whare,  
Tēnei te mihi ki a koutou  
Haere mai  
Haere mai ki tēnei kauhau tuatahi mōku  
Ka nui te hari me te koa kua haere mai koutou  
Na reira, ngā hau e whā, ngā waka e whitu  
Tēnā koutou  
Tēnā koutou  
Tēnā tātou katoa.

Inaugural lectures are all about celebrating scholarship but their content, of course, is not necessarily celebratory. Indeed if there is anything to be celebrated about my work to date, it is probably a stubborn refusal to be satisfied with education policy, practice and research while we have such an unequal society and important political pressures towards greater inequality. Instead, as a policy sociologist in education, I have long been drawn to uncomfortable questions about whose interests are really being served in and through education (Thrupp, 1999a). I have 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 have also increasingly turned

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<sup>1</sup> Inaugural Professorial Address, March 2007

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 have begun to take up that difficult challenge which is always being put to critical scholars – ‘so what’s the alternative?’ (Thrupp, 2005a).

This paper will weave together some of this work. I have called it “Education's ‘Inconvenient Truth’: Persistent Middle Class Advantage”. What I will be talking about is how I think 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 in some ways it is pretty obvious that, by and large, the neo-liberal 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, I think middle class advantage is not discussed much because of the self-interest the phrase ‘inconvenient truth’ also implies. Our self-interest variously includes:

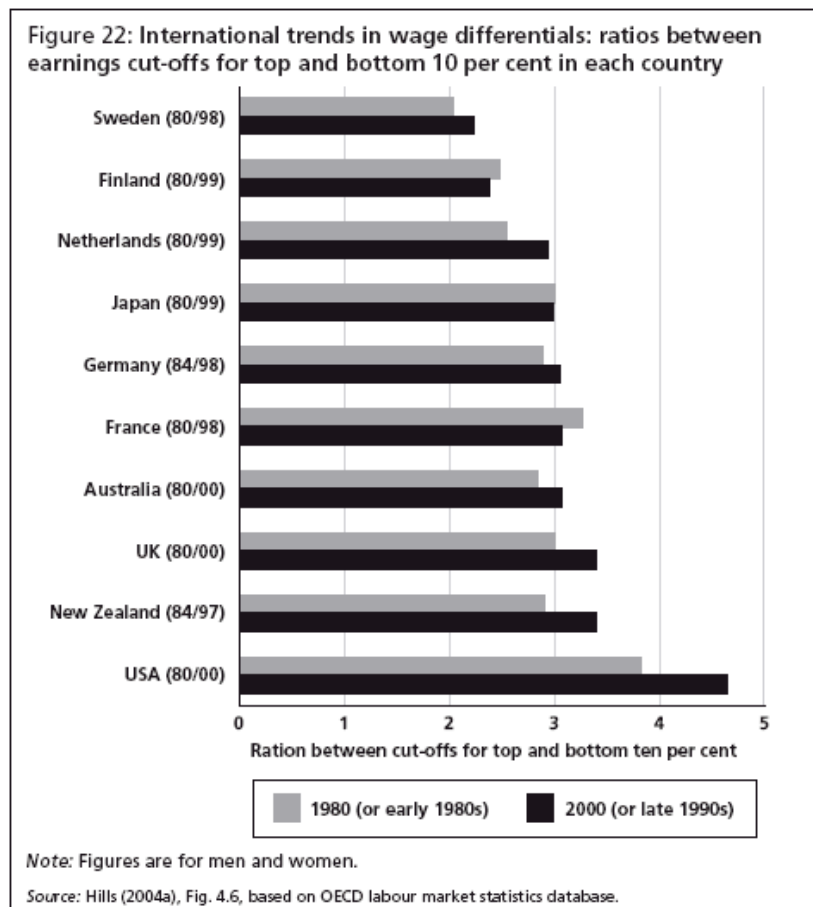
- seeing middle class children get advantaged which is in our interests as middle class parents if we want them to ‘do well’;
- helping middle class children get into our schools and make good progress which, for reasons discussed later, can be in our interests as teachers and principals if we want to 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.

It is much easier to talk in a disconnected way about an underclass, as we have seen a lot of lately in national politics, than to see ourselves creating the educational problems of the poor, which, as I will illustrate, is often exactly what we do.

Third, *An Inconvenient Truth* is also 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 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 should not 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 this paper are the concepts of social class and the middle class, so let me say something briefly about those. While the development of post-modernist and post-structuralist theory over the 1980s and 1990s may have led to the wholesale neglect of class, it is very definitely on the rebound again. And that is great because while those bodies of theory brought important insights, they distracted from the fact that economic and social inequalities have been not only persisting but growing in many countries. For instance, the table below is from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a UK social policy research and development charity. It shows that there was an increase in wage inequality between 1980 and 2000 in 7 of the 10 countries shown: only Finland, Japan and France had a decline (see Glennerster, Hills, Piachaud & Webb, 2004).



**Figure 1.** *Changes in Wage Inequality 1980-2000 in 10 Countries (from Glennerster et al., 2004, Figure 22, p. 143)*

New Zealand certainly did not do well over those decades; only the US had a larger increase in wage inequality. Then the Ministry of Social Development Report on *New Zealand Living Standards* released last year which covers the period 2000-2004 (Jensen et al., 2006) showed that disparities in living standards continued to increase over those years largely because sole parents, large families and those reliant on income-tested benefits had lower living standards by 2004 than they did in 2000.

The new concern with social class, as seen for instance in the work of Mike Savage (Savage, 2000) and Fiona Devine (Devine et al., 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. Carrying this development into education have been a number of academics with whom I was fortunate to work closely in London; namely Diane Reay, Stephen Ball, Carol Vincent and Ruth Lupton. Drawing especially on the theoretical tools provided by the late Pierre Bourdieu, all of these people have been serious about rethinking class in education. For instance, this is Diane Reay pointing to the crucial importance of class in education:

Until we address social class as a central issue within education then social class will remain the troublesome un-dead of the English education system. I am not conjuring up here some gentle shadowy ghost haunting our classrooms but a potential monster that grows in proportion to its neglect. (Reay, 2006, p. 289)

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. (Reay, 2006, 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) 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” (p. 5). Also of interest is how the middle class “fails to register the social implications of its routine actions” (Savage 2000, p. 159). Both of these are themes which will come through consistently in this paper.

The other points I want to make about class are more specific to New Zealand. The first is that Pākehā 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. The second is that Māori, like everyone, are part of the class structure and yet class does not get much mention in Māori discourses. The reasons for this are as much political as intellectual I think, 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 (Sharp, 1990). My own view is that 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.



And so to the specifics of this paper. There are many ways to talk about persistent middle class advantage in education. I could talk about:

- Family resources, relationships between parents and schools and middle class dominance of school governance, boards of trustees for instance. 'Home Advantage' as Annette Lareau put it (Lareau, 1989).
- Class biases in the curriculum and the need for what R. W. Connell has called 'Curricula Justice' (Connell, 1994).
- 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 UK, the Cambridge exam, in about 40 high decile schools.
- How within schools the performative 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).

What I focus on here is what I have worked on most over the years, which is how the middle class access predominantly middle class school settings and the likely advantages that those kinds of school contexts bring. I start by looking at 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 high decile schools. In the second part of the paper I then come at the problem from another angle and argue that the middle class have too many friends in education, which 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 will not 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.

However, none of this is truly inevitable and I conclude by looking at how we might start to do things differently, at how the orientation of schooling to the middle classes might be reduced. I do this because mine is an account 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 naïve hope, recognises the very real historical and structural difficulties which need to be overcome (Grace, 2004).

**PERSISTENT MIDDLE CLASS ADVANTAGE**

I want to start by looking at the reasons why most parents, and especially middle class parents, are keen to get their children into predominantly middle class, socially advantaged school settings – those decile 8, 9, 10 schools if you like. Which, I hasten to add, my children attend too; my position is by no means holier-than-thou. As I stated earlier, most of us are implicated in some way; I just think more honesty is called for. In part, the preference for those sorts of schools reflects 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, p. 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.

Now 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.

I have written a lot about this previously (e.g., Thrupp, 1999a) but the key point to grasp is that these advantages of middle class schools are probably school-based but not school-caused: they need not 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 is also important to state that the existence and size of compositional effects remains a matter of some debate (Thrupp et al., 2002). Research in this area continues, including a very large study of Hampshire primary schools which I had funded in the UK and with which I am still involved.

What is clear is that, given half a chance, we in the middle classes will typically cluster together residentially, group our children together in predominantly

middle class schools and give them *some sort of advantaged education* by excluding the poor. Historical analyses by Gary McCulloch show this happening in New Zealand over many decades and a market model intensifying it (McCulloch, 1990, 1991). So what has the Labour Party done to prevent this? In 1999 it 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, p. 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 Labour 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 SES schools from having their high SES 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.

However, what is important to realise is that 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 by Diane Pearce and Liz Gordon 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, p. 7). Moreover, Pearce and Gordon (forthcoming) point out that, unlike the old Department of Education school zones, they 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" (Pearce & Gordon, forthcoming, p. 8). So we might have zoning but it now 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 SES schools from having students creamed off by more popular higher SES schools. Nor do they prevent poor families being cut out of a school's zone.

What can also be said with confidence is that, with living in-zone now the only sure way for children to be enrolled in a popular school, any pockets of low cost housing suitable for poorer families in the zones of popular schools will rarely stay that way for long. What I am referring to is the effect of being in the zone of popular schools on the affordability of house prices ('selection by mortgage'). Debate in this area has tended to revolve around Auckland's 'Grammar zone' where houses on different sides of the same street can have a \$100,000 price difference 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 UK research (Cheshire, 2005) 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 popular high SES schools to make a difference to asking price and to feature in advertising.

Hillcrest in Hamilton is a good example. I live in Hillcrest and after my big commutes to London I love being able to walk to work each day but it is clear that a lot of the housing stock was built in the 1950s and 1960s and is now a bit tired. There has also been a lot of infill housing. Yet prices are high (\$350,000 and above), pushed up by investment in student rentals but also by Hillcrest's high decile schools. These nearly always feature in advertising, as is evident in this advert for a house out in Newell's Rd, a kind of rural-residential area on the outskirts of Hillcrest:



**Figure 2.** *Advertisement highlighting SES status [address and agent deleted].*

It caught my eye because I have never seen one so blatant – there is not even any attempt to use euphemisms like 'well-regarded' or 'high quality' schools – it goes so shamelessly to the point that there are predominantly middle class schools on offer because that's what decile 10 schools are of course.

Let me keep with housing for a moment because my work with the Child Poverty Action Group has made me realise how much we need to see the interaction of education with what is happening in other sectors 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 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 that 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 I 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 question whether these non-changing zones and the wealth of the communities have interacted to compound inequalities between suburbs. It has not been researched, but it is a good bet is it not?

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. What seems to be happening, as reported in a recent *Sunday Star Times* article (Grunwell, 2007) is that 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. To use the example provided, 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 (see Grunwell, 2007), unless you have 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 it depends what specific private school is being talked about).

On the other side of the coin are the disadvantages for poorer families created by middle class investment in cheaper rental properties. Alan Johnson of the Child Poverty Action Group points to the way investment activity from middle class households has contributed to the poorest 30% of households becoming dependent on the whims of their landlords 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. It will also come as no surprise that overcrowded and insecure housing creates educational disadvantages for the poor, especially transience between schools associated with 'house hopping' and absence from school due to health issues (Gilbert, 2005). So 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.

Also outside of education but impacting strongly on school resourcing is the area of family assistance and benefits. I want to talk about this as it relates to the vexed issue of school resourcing. School resourcing 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. The following tables come from the Quality Public Education Coalition (2006).

**Table 1. Government Funding as a Percentage of School Income**

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

**Table 2. Local Fundraising Per Child**

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

It is also vexed because, while government does provide equity funding of around \$250 million spread over 15 programmes and low decile schools get more of this funding than high decile schools, it is not clear that low decile schools 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 for the inability of low decile schools to raise local money. For instance, at Insoll Avenue School, a decile 1 school in Hamilton, the donation is only \$10 a term but the school only receives it from about 5% of parents. Yet low decile schools like Insoll Ave do not necessarily look under-resourced – this school has great buildings and classrooms and playground equipment which is quite common in decile 1 schools across the country – so we are not like the UK and especially the US where poor schools are often really obviously under-resourced. However, the fact is that huge amounts of extra staffing and other resourcing would need to flow towards low socio-economic schools like this 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 does not join up on these matters. The Ministry of Social Development *New Zealand Living Standards Report* 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 over-representation 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). To my mind, if we were going to take seriously this increasing gap between the 'in work' and 'not in work' in education, 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.

### **THE MIDDLE CLASSES HAVE TOO MANY FRIENDS IN EDUCATION**

In this second part of this paper I want to look at how those who work in key roles in the education sector help to perpetuate middle class advantage in education: including teachers and principals, politicians and policymakers, and academics in the field of education. 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 will be able to allow for here. But many educators do wittingly or unwittingly perpetuate middle class advantage and, at the risk of over-generalising, we need to acknowledge and highlight that problem.

### **TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS**

Research has indicated that teachers and principals can advantage the middle class in many 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. Again, however, let us go back to that 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 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 tend to stay (Becker, 1952) – 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 has shown a similar pattern here in New Zealand 50 years later (Ritchie, 2004). 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 socio-economic schools if they have declining rolls. And 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 project that I worked on in the early 1990s (Lauder et al., 1999) showed a significant relationship between socio-economic status and probability of being accepted by a high decile school, even after controlling for achievement. And what are we to make of the rigour with which the zones of high status schools are being policed? Last year 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 schools have been carrying out early morning doorknocks 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 over-zealous in interpreting the zoning legislation: for instance, the Ministry of Education upheld 20 out of 45 appeals against Auckland Grammar’s action. However, it does have the effect of maintaining a socially privileged intake by more rigorously excluding those who cannot afford to live in zone.

Catholic and private schools do not market themselves as bastions of privilege. In fact, somewhat disingenuously, the celebratory websites of the New Zealand Catholic Education Office and the Independent Schools of New Zealand and the equally celebratory utterances of their key spokespeople (CEO Brother Pat Lynch and Joy Quigley respectively) imply that the reasons people choose their schools over state schools 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, such as families where the parents had separated (Whitty et al., 1998). However, we can certainly see the pursuit of positional advantage in the Catholic school system where the popular schools with enrolment schemes are again high decile schools. I note that my old school, St Bernard’s College in Lower Hutt, which used to be mainly middle class, is now a decile 5 school with more than 50% Māori and Pasifika students. In my view, that school could exude all the religious character it wanted but there is no way it will now become particularly sought after by middle class Catholic families. It may not even be a consideration. Instead such families would probably want their boys to attend decile 9, predominantly Pākehā, 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’, and 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 also typically do not want to talk about the kinds of persistent pressures towards middle class advantage in education that I have been raising because electorally doing anything about them is in the 'too hard' basket. For instance, this is what the Minister 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, p. 1).

It is hardly a rigorous defence. What is crucial to appreciate here is that education policy, like other policy, is shaped and bounded by electoral pressures. Politicians are generally looking for education policy which will appeal to the middle classes (which are also more likely to vote than families in poverty), not policy which will make the government more unpopular. Again, I have never seen any New Zealand work on this 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, a more class conscious society, it is not quite the same and there are articles in the *Guardian* newspaper 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). In some ways, this is fair enough: I am sure we would all 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 has called 'small victories' into what she calls 'large victories' (Anyon, 1997) 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 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 – neo-liberal policy technologies as Stephen Ball calls them – others, overwhelmingly in those literatures I just mentioned – were more busy being on-message and finding ways to help schools come to terms with those policy technologies. They 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 \$5,000 a head for conference, full-day tutorial and a gala dinner. Barber is really in an 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. I invite you to go to their websites and see for yourself how much some of them make an industry of themselves. You go onto Michael Fullan's website ([www.michaelfullan.ca](http://www.michaelfullan.ca)) for instance, and you are invited to download logos, photos of him; everything.

In my book with Rob Willmott (Thrupp & Willmott, 2003) we critiqued how the work of such academics acts to textually apologise for neo-liberal reform in education. Some 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 are 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.

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 have put it, social context has been bleached out of their analytic frame

(Slee & Weiner, 1998). They have instead worked to the tenets of the New Public Management (NPM) 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.

### **REINING IN MIDDLE CLASS ADVANTAGE**

Moving towards my conclusion, I want to consider how we might start to do things differently, how middle class advantage might begin to be somewhat reined in. Starting with the academic work I have just mentioned, 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. All of this is what we are trying to achieve through our project in Hampshire primary schools and it is a way that research really can help in terms of both policy and practice (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006).

Another thing academics can do is help to keep New Zealand insulated from the worst excesses of neo-liberal education policy elsewhere. 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. However, 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 the Education Leadership Centre at the University of Waikato became involved in the New Zealand launch of iNET. This organisation 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 we 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 head teachers 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. No matter how tight funding gets across the school sector as a whole, it really 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 is possible it should be happening.

Finally there is an ethical challenge for all of us who are middle class. It is 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). 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, p. 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.

This really is education’s inconvenient truth – and what are we going to do about it?

Na reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, kia ora tātou katoa.

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