

# **SOCIAL CLASS AND EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT: BEYOND IDEOLOGY.**

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## **1. Introduction:**

Discussions of “league tables” of NCEA results in secondary schools and the proposed “national standards” in primary schools have drawn attention once again to what is often called “the gap” - the wide variation in success rates for different groups gaining school-based qualifications. In New Zealand this has tended to focus on differences between Maori and Pakeha but it arises also in discussion of social class. Up and down the country newspaper editorials and commentators on radio and television have sung the same tune: the failure of students must be laid at the door of teachers. In relation to the proposed standards, the tone is of outrage that teachers should be “scared” of being held accountable. Spokespersons for schools and the occasional academic have tried (largely in vain) to argue that achievement differences are largely the result of social class and home background and hence it is ethically wrong to hold teachers accountable for them. This debate (“social class” vs “teacher accountability”) mirrors one which has been going on for a long time in many countries but particularly in the United States where the gaps between African Americans/Latinos and white Americans and between wealthy schools and poor schools are enormous.

Although there are overlaps in basic positions, the dispute is often ideological rather than data based and because of this, each side tends to see the other as merely providing excuses. When critics of the proposed national standards argued that most of the variation in achievement is the result of social class differences the Minister called this an excuse for inadequate teachers and “failing schools.” On the other hand, those who stress the role of schools and teachers are, in turn, accused of providing an excuse for social policies which keep families poor and their children ill-prepared to learn. Thus the question about the “gap” boils down to the question, which is empirical rather than ideological: “Can educational inequalities be removed

by changes in the school or must they be tackled in the wider community?" This paper attempts to answer this empirical question and, hence, to move beyond ideology.

## **2. Social Class and educational achievement:**

The case presented by those who stress the role of social class is straightforward:

- The "gap" is not restricted to one society (eg USA or NZ) or to one type of society (eg English-speaking). It occurs in every developed society: students with good family resources out- perform those who come from poorer backgrounds. Authors writing of the future of education in Britain write: "One of the biggest problems facing British schools is the gap between rich and poor, and the enormous disparity in children's home backgrounds and the social and cultural capital they bring to the educational table." (Benn & Millar, 2006 p. 23). According to a recent OECD volume, research on learning yields a number of conclusions and "The first and most solidly based finding is that the largest source of variation in student learning is attributable to differences in what students bring to school." (OECD 2005 p 2). Despite its support for "accountability based programmes" the US Office of Education, having reviewed the international evidence, admitted that it was clear that "Most participating countries do not differ significantly from the United States in terms of the strength of relationship between socioeconomic status and literacy in any subject." (Lemke et al, p. 35).
- When children attend schools which are widely different in social class composition, the gaps between the achievement of schools mirror closely the gaps between the social classes which predominate in them. Based on his research in New Zealand (and consistent with many overseas studies) Richard Harker has claimed that "anywhere between 70-80% of the between schools variance is due to the student 'mix' which means that only between 20% and 30% is attributable to the schools themselves" (Harker 1995, p.74) In New Zealand, this fact is marked by decile levels: a ten-point scale which ranks schools from 1 to 10 in terms of the income/educational level of the parents. Independent schools which

are not officially ranked are in fact high decile (usually decile 10).<sup>\*</sup> When one looks at more or less objective data (such as the old School Certificate and the new NCEA results), the school's decile ranking correlates very closely with success rates in public examinations.

- The inequalities are not restricted to educational achievement. Within any society, including New Zealand, those who are poor are much less healthy, have lower life expectancy, lack adequate housing, are over represented in the prison population, and are more often the victims and the perpetrators of violence. Educational inequality is one part of wider social inequality.
- A recent large scale study (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2004) took this a little further and asked whether the same is true of societies: are poor societies more likely to have bad health, low life expectancy, poor educational achievement and more violence? The answer is: only up to a point (average income \$25,000). After that it evens out so that, for example, the incidence of social problems is no lower in the USA (average income \$40,000) than in Cyprus (average income \$25,000). The researchers argue that in advanced societies, social problems are due not to the amount of income but to the **spread** of income. To give just one example: USA, New Zealand, Portugal, Ireland (with high income inequality) have high infant mortality rates while Japan, Sweden, Finland, Norway (low income inequality) have low infant mortality rates. The same picture is basically true of health, violence, life expectancy, teenage pregnancy, rates of imprisonment, abuse of alcohol and the use of illegal drugs. In relation to educational achievement, the

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\* A school's decile level indicates the extent to which the school draws its students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 1 schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities whereas Decile 10 schools are the 10% of schools with the lowest proportion of these students. Student addresses supplied by each school are assigned to a block from the National Census called a meshblock, using only households where there are school age children. Five socio-economic indicators are used: Household income; Parental occupation; Household crowding (the proportion of household members per bedroom adjusted for couples and for children under ten); Educational qualifications (the percentage of parents with no tertiary or school qualifications); Income support (the percentage of parents who directly receive a Domestic Purposes Benefit, an Unemployment Benefit, or a Sickness and Invalid's Benefit). Schools are ranked in relation to every other school and receive a score according to the percentile they fall into. The five scores for each school are added together (without any weightings) to give a total. The schools are then placed in ten groups called deciles, each having the same number of schools. (Accessed from: [www.minedu.govt/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/SchoolOperations](http://www.minedu.govt/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/SchoolOperations)). The purpose of this exercise is for the Ministry of Education to provide extra resources for lower decile schools to compensate for their disadvantages but in fact it has been established that some high decile schools, particularly Catholic integrated schools, raise much more money from parents and the community than do lower decile schools. One decile 8 Catholic integrated school raised over 6 million dollars in 2008. (NZ Education Review, September 25th, 2009). Thus, social advantage is intensified rather than lessened.

authors say, “Although good schools make a difference, the biggest influence on educational attainment, how well a child performs in school and later in higher education, is family background.” (op.cit, p 103). Tackling each problem separately, the authors argue, is relatively ineffective for even when there is a solution (eg a medical cure or an educational breakthrough) the problems just appear in new ways.

- It is common knowledge that in New Zealand the gap between wealthy and poor has widened enormously since the social revolutions of the 1980’s/1990’s. This has been accompanied by a dramatic rise in violence, child mortality, infectious diseases and a decline in overall school achievement due to “the long tail of underachievement” which may well be “the long tail of poverty.” In international tests of reading, for example, New Zealand has since the 1970’s steadily dropped from 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> (Tunmer & Prochnow, in press).
- All this leads to the conclusion that, on their own, schools are relatively powerless to close the educational gap: closing the gap requires an emphasis on policies to remove the causes of poverty. To hold schools and teachers accountable for differences in the attainment of social groups is unfair and unreasonable.

### **3. A Critique of social class and achievement**

Despite this very cogent case, there is a powerful body of opinion which rejects it. A key representative of this school of thought in the USA puts the case thus: “Educators...are continually told that poor children and African American, Latino and American Indian children cannot achieve at high levels because poverty and discrimination create too many hurdles to learning. Far too many have swallowed this argument---hook, line and sinker.” (Chenoweth, 2007, p.ix). Chenoweth and her supporters, (including apparently the Minister and her advisors in New Zealand) believe that the case for social origin is misguided and that “teachers can do it.” Their argument goes like this:

- The case for the socially based causes of school failure is deterministic. It is elitist or racist to hold that there are some children who can never learn, no matter what they do or how they are taught.

- In fact, there are schools which “beat the odds” and enable underprivileged students to achieve at the highest level.
- If some teachers/ schools can do it, all teachers/schools can do it.

I want to examine each of these arguments:

1. *Social class explanations are deterministic.*

- No doubt there have been teachers who use home background or race as an excuse and adopt an attitude that “this lot are not worth it.” But this is not the position of the sociologists of education who insist on the key role of social class. They have produced data which show how things are in a particular society: they do not hold that “nothing can be done.” On the contrary they insist that much **can** be done to eliminate or reduce poverty and all that goes with it in terms of housing, health, violence, and school achievement. They do, however, argue that what schools can do in isolation is limited.
- The data on class differences provide averages and do not tell us anything about individuals. On average, the poor have worse health than others: but many poor people are quite healthy. Violence is common in poor areas but many poor people are perfectly law abiding and their communities safe. And many children from lower socio-economic groups out-perform academically those from higher groups. No individual is pre-destined by class to any level of achievement. It is astonishing that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this point has to be made because it is so often overlooked.
- It follows that it is the job of the teacher to teach each child as well as she/he can and the responsibility of every school is to do all it can to ensure that every child achieves as much as she/he is able. Class theory should never be used as an excuse for ineffective teaching or inadequate leadership. If any principal or teacher uses that excuse, she/he must be held accountable for an erroneous interpretation of the evidence.
- It should be acknowledged, however, that there is a position which **is** deterministic and this position has some powerful supporters. The most

recent of these is Charles Murray who argues that “For any given ability, the population forms a continuum that goes from very low to very high. The core abilities that dominate academic success vary together: schools that ignore those realities are doing a disservice to all their students.” (2008, p. 30). Murray argues that the opposing view (that with good schools, all can achieve) is “educational romanticism.” He believes that the American “No Child Left Behind” policy (on which NZ policy seems to be based) is “romantic nonsense” which must be got rid of. It is indeed rather surprising that a position which once was almost universally accepted (some children are brighter than others) should be now almost universally ignored by government officials and policy makers not only in USA but in New Zealand too. But, I repeat, this is not the position of sociologists of education who argue for the centrality of home background and social class and it is not a position which I wish to defend in this paper.

## 2. *Some schools have beaten the odds.*

Because of their theoretical commitments, a major activity of the “teacher accountability” movement is to find and publicise schools/ teachers/ principals who “defy the odds” and reduce or eliminate the gap. There are indeed, in the USA, trusts and research groups dedicated to this task. These are some examples:

- Heritage Foundation. They identified 21 high poverty schools with high achievement and attributed it to making ‘no excuses’ based on class or culture.
- KIPP schools are schools which parents can choose. Children attend schools until 5pm each day, and have school on Saturday and three weeks summer school. Overall all the children spend 67% more time in class than children in other schools. They manage it financially by gaining foundation grants and hiring only young teachers.
- Education Trust high flying schools. These constitute some 10% of poor schools a total of 1,320 schools at least half of whose students are both

poor and minority and whose test scores in mathematics or reading were in the top third of their states.

- 90/90/90 schools: These are schools with 90% receiving free or subsidised lunches, 90% being from minorities and 90% achieving “high academic standards.”

Since the social class argument is not deterministic, it is not an inevitable that children from lower socio economic backgrounds will achieve badly. If there are schools which “defy the odds” competent educationists will rejoice and try to isolate features which can be generalised to help improve other schools. Nevertheless, particular claims about such schools have to be treated very cautiously for a number of reasons:

- Many of the schools are set up or selected by people who are politically motivated to disprove the role of social class. This, of course, does not in itself count against their work but as with drug companies, nutritionists and alternative medicines we need to be alert to the errors which can be made, intentionally or unintentionally, when the researcher is committed to a fundamental position. (For a chilling account of these phenomena, see Goldacre, 2008).
- If schools are able to select their students, they often choose the most able and, if parents have choice of school, the more motivated tend to try to better their children’s chances. There is, therefore, often a degree of selectivity in the schools which is not always highlighted in the publicity. Some Heritage schools, for example, are quite selective: some are private schools and others are schools which parents have to apply to for their child’s entry: “Only six of the 21 schools were fully non-selective.” (Rothstein, 2004, p. 72). In Education Trust Schools, half the intake is middle class and some of them are “magnet schools” attracting more motivated students from outside the neighbourhood. KIPP Academies, according to Rothstein, are engaged in a form of affirmative action: they select from the top of the ability range those lower-class students with innate intelligence, well-motivated parents, or their

own personal drives and give these children an education to improve their life chances.

- In many cases the reporting of “achievement” is misleading. Only a third of the “high flying schools” of the Education Trust had high scores in *both* reading and mathematics; only 10% were high in reading and mathematics in *more than one grade*; and only 3% were high in reading and mathematics for *two years running*. Overall “Less than half of one percent of these high poverty and high minority schools were truly high flying, scoring well consistently.” (*ibid.*, p. 76).
- Care is needed in case the reported results stem from factors other than the activities of teachers. One school principal who gained national attention in the USA for the success of his school failed to point out that a team of optometrists conducted a six year demonstration in the school, showing that children fitted with glasses achieved a 4.5 percentile point gain in reading ability. Rothstein claims that “fifty percent or more of minority children and low income children have vision problems which interfere with their work.” (*ibid.*, p. 37).
- Caution is needed about the criteria used to identify “children of poverty.” In the United States the measure used is the number of those receiving free or subsidised lunches. These indeed indicate low income but this is not enough on its own. Sometimes poverty is temporary as when parents are young and/or dependent on only one income or the school is attended by the children of graduate students at the local university who are “poor” but provide a rich intellectual environment for their children. Similarly, in New Zealand, while it is useful to use “decile ranking” it is important to recognise that it is a crude measure: it is unlikely that two schools of identical decile level will be the same in all relevant respects: some may involve cultures (religious or ethnic) with shared value systems, are used to community participation and value education for what it can achieve in life. (For this reason, among others, care has to be taken with the idea of “value added education”)
- Care has to be taken with the use of test scores. Some schools highlight gains in early grades but not the later slippages. The improvement of reading by the use of phonics is often marked in the early grades but vanishes further up the

school. Furthermore, it is all very well to say that 70% of the students have achieved at a basic level but there are different basic levels in different tests and in different school districts. If the “bar” is set very low, almost all will clear it; if set to high almost none will. In both cases the gap will be diminished. And test scores are only a small part of the story. We must look beyond school tests to see if students who have made impressive test gains remain up with the play in terms of entry to and success in tertiary study, access to and progress in careers and so on. David Levin, the co-founder and superintendent of the KIPP school in the Bronx, admits that the school cannot totally compensate for home background. Though their students do much better than comparable students in other schools they don’t do well enough to pass tests for entry to the selective high schools in the city. (*ibid.*, p.82).

- Almost all the successful schools have carefully selected their teachers and/or provided substantial and on-going professional training. Thus, solutions to the ‘gap’ depend upon a large supply of very good teachers. This point will be taken up when considering the argument that “if some can do it, all can do it.”
- We have to recognise that achieving on standardised tests is not all of education and may not even be the most important part. The business world often argues that affective characteristics are more important to them than cognitive ones: they want employees who are loyal, trustworthy, creative, flexible and able to work cooperatively. Standardised tests do not measure these traits and may indeed discourage them (If there is always only one right answer, what is there to be flexible or creative about? If everyone is competing for scores what likelihood is there of genuine cooperation?). If only those who demand that the schools produce a certain kind of citizen were to follow it through into their recommendations for student assessment.

Rothstein, after a sustained study of the question, concludes “A careful examination of each claim that a particular school or practice has closed the race or social class achievement gap shows that the claim is unfounded.” (*ibid.*, p. 5).

In a later section I shall examine another group of American schools which may undermine what Rothstein says. In the meantime, however, we have to say, that little

of the evidence looked at so far supports the case that all or even most of the reported success can be attributed to instructional methods, as is often implied in the popular literature. Even if they did, this would not show that “what they have done, anyone can do.”

3. *If they can do it all can do it.*

A major problem in arguing that if some can do it all can do it, is that it presumes that what is done by excellent teachers in certain situations can be replicated by average and below average teachers in quite other circumstances, but

- In teaching as in most human activities, participants conform to a bell curve or something like it. We can rightly expect all teachers to be competent but it would be unreasonable to demand that all be excellent. That would be little like saying that all lawyers should be able to perform like leading QC's or that all distance runners should be able to do four minute miles. Nor are all situations identical: a small primary school in a provincial town is very different from a large secondary school in the inner city even if its students are superficially similar. Rich but not very well educated immigrant parents may make demands on a school quite different from those of well educated local people whose social standing is similar. The same principal or teacher may perform brilliantly in one situation and quite poorly in another. Those who have worked in universities (and their students) know that there are teachers who are spectacularly good with graduate students and below average (or worse!) with beginning classes.
- Most of the claims about excellent teachers are circular. Researchers study test scores and identify teachers whose students make exceptional progress. These are then called “excellent teachers.” But normally the researchers have no idea what it is that makes them excellent teachers and hence do not provide any guidance as to how ordinary teachers can be substantially improved.

#### 4. *Its Being Done*

Karin Chenoweth is a reporter and a leading figure in the Education Trust (USA); she is very sensitive to the problems of accurately measuring the achievement of schools. So she identified and visited 15 schools and wrote a book about them (Chenoweth, 2007). The schools selected had to satisfy the following criteria:

- There was a predominant enrolment of the poor and coloured;
- There was high achievement or rapid improvement on standardised tests of attainment;
- There were at least two years of data on achievement and/or higher rates of graduation from high school.
- There was (a USA federal criterion) Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).
- There were high rates of graduation (high schools).
- There was open enrolment (to avoid the selectivity issue discussed above).

Although the data are, by necessity, limited it seems that these fifteen schools do produce results which are outside the range that would be predicted on the basis of their composition Furthermore, many of the criticisms levelled at this kind of literature do not seem to be present here: students are not selected, there is little “teaching to the test”, and the curriculum is not narrowed: rather, there is a broadly based attack on the problem. There is typically an impressive involvement of parents, longer school days, the provision of homework centres and health facilities on campus, free “summer schools,” help in the classroom from teacher aides or parents and so on. The schools do not achieve results simply by adopting certain instructional procedures though they do focus on reading (often “across the curriculum” eg in science and social studies). Far from treating the social/cultural as irrelevant, these schools make it central and dedicate their energies to trying to compensate for the initial social disadvantage by replicating in and around the schools the services which middle class children already get in and around their homes.

Even so, we must note that we are talking about only 15 schools out of, say, 15,000 impoverished schools, that they are, by and large, well resourced (from the Federal

Government and/or local foundations), that almost all are small elementary schools, and rarely situated in a large city such as New York or Detroit. In addition a close look at the data reveal that in many cases the comparison with local and state wide results looks impressive largely because the local or state results are already quite high (often over 80% attaining the standard) and the particular school's score starts out dramatically low. (In lay terms, this suggests that the tasks are "easy" and hence it is not difficult to improve test scores dramatically). It is also important to note that where scores are reported for different ethnic groups and/or the poor, the gaps usually remain even if they have been narrowed. Finally, and significantly, the teachers are normally specially chosen: one school has some 350 applicants for each vacancy: "teachers want to work here," said the principal.

It must be remembered that Chenoweth is a journalist and a person completely committed to undermining the case for social class/culture dominance. It would be helpful if some social scientists were to analyse the school data scientifically, giving due weight to subtle demographic features of each school. In fact, however, the literature on her work takes it at face value and praises it highly. Such is the power of ideology.

An interesting commentary on this work is provided by a letter written in response. One of the schools which Chenoweth identified as excellent was M.Hall Stanton. Ted Smith wrote to the *American Educator*: "[Chenoweth's] profile of M.Hall Stanton Elementary School in Philadelphia, a school at which it was my honour to teach, supplies ample evidence that given adequate leadership, teaching staff, resources, and administrative structures, any school can implement programs that can dramatically improve student achievement as measured by standardised tests". However, he goes on to say "Let me suggest what every teacher in America's inner cities knows but is timid about admitting publicly-the positive momentum created through the most caring, rigorous, and dynamic school experience is all but destroyed for far too many of our children as soon as their sneakers hit the sidewalk after the three o'clock bell. Even at Stanton, a school held up as a beacon of hope for inner city education, the discipline and the imagination lasts only six daylight hours. The other eighteen swallow up too many of our children in violence, neglect, hunger and despair." As a

result he has gone on to set up a Circle of Influence website for teachers who are interested in “pushing the boundaries of their influence.” (Smith 2007-2008).

### 5. Some New Zealand work

New Zealand does not have a large body of research on these questions. But there are three sets of data which can be used to throw some local light on the issue: the Progress at Schools Project, The Kotahitanga Project, and a recent reworking of data on NCEA in schools by a reporter for *Metro*.

**Progress at Schools Project.** In the early 1990's the Ministry of Education contracted the *Progress at School* project, one of the largest programmes of educational research ever carried out in New Zealand. It was designed to detect the influence of individual secondary schools on the examination performance of individual students or, to put the matter slightly differently, to find out “the *added value* (or the reverse of that) contributed by an individual school when the nature of its intake has been taken into account.” (Nash & Harker, 1995, p 35.)<sup>\*</sup> The examination scores of 37 schools were analysed using a sophisticated statistical technique known as Hierarchical Linear Modelling. The researchers also conducted many interviews. Many publications arose from this massive study. For my purpose, some of the major conclusions of this research are:

- “A considerable proportion of the between-school variance, 67% for English, 68% for mathematics, and 66% for science, is due to the initial ability, and social and ethnic characteristics of individual students” (*ibid.*, p. 56).
- “At least 9 percent of total variance in English, 5 percent in mathematics, and 5.5 percent in science is systematically related to the characteristics of schools.” (*Ibid.*)
- Because of the statistical nature of much of this research, the researchers were unable to indicate precisely what it is about the successful schools which led

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\* It is worth noting that the researchers were not entirely happy with the notion of “added value” since it is an imprecise notion which stems from a managerial and technicist model of education which they do not favour. Nevertheless they used it because of its widespread adoption since the “reforms” of the late 1980's. It is noteworthy that they also say: “The research reported in this volume should have made it clear that determining whether a school has added value to its students is a costly, elaborate, and controversial undertaking.” (Nash & Harker, 1995, p 148.)

to their superior examination results. However, they identified three schools which “underperformed” and two schools which “overperformed” in relation to their intake. A comparison between these two sets of schools yielded two clues. Firstly, “those who attended the two schools where performance improved reported a more extensive involvement in cultural activities with parents and a higher interest in reading.” (These of course are further variables *outside the school* which indicates that the effect of social class and home background may be underestimated despite already being huge). Secondly, they found a significant association with “emotional disturbance” at school. In poorly performing schools, for example, bullying was common. “The evidence of our research suggests that boys’ schools, particularly those with a largely working class intake, are peculiarly difficult to manage. The bullying that goes on in those schools scars more students than we like to think about.” (loc.cit, p. 51).

From this research we might derive a tentative suggestion that schools which want to improve the achievement of their students should concentrate on the relationships within them rather than on the cognitive dimensions themselves. It may indeed be the case that in the schools discussed so far, the success has less to do with the focus on instruction and assessment and more to do with the fact that “new brooms” (principals and teachers) manage to create a much better emotional climate than previously existed. It is certainly worth considering.

**The Te Kotahitanga Project.** Over the past seven years, a team of researchers funded by the Ministry of Education has been pursuing a project relating to effective teaching for Maori students in mainstream secondary schools. The project began with intensive work with Maori students in years 9 and 10. From this research, the researchers devised an Effective Teaching Profile (ETP) which they have used to work with teachers in 37 schools. They claim that there has been significant improvement in Maori achievement. The ETP has many facets such as teacher expectations, a caring philosophy, well managed classrooms, a focus on achievement and a range of teaching strategies. But the fundamental stance of the Project is “the creation of a culturally responsive context for learning,” in which teachers “care for and acknowledge the mana of the students as culturally located individuals.” (Bishop

& Berryman, 2009, p 31). So once again, we find in this work that, though the instructional methods are important, recognition of the cultural background of the students is fundamental.

**The Metro article.** Each year recently, the newspapers throughout the country have run “league tables” of the pass rates of all the schools in their area in NCEA and Scholarship. A glance at these reveals the obvious: although there are always some exceptions, high decile schools (including private schools) figure near the top, low decile schools near the bottom. In 2009 a reporter for the magazine *Metro*, realising that such reporting of “raw scores” is grossly misleading, re-analysed some of the data for schools in the Auckland area. (Wilson, 2009). He chose three sets of results: NCEA level 2, NCEA level 1 Merit and Excellence (since this, he argues, is a measure of quality above mere competence), and Scholarship. He then calculated the average score for each decile level and worked out how well each school performed in relation to the decile average. Then he ranked schools on this adjusted score. This, he believes, gives a measure of “added value.” Before going any further, it is important to note some points:

- Decile rank is a crude measure of student quality. No two decile 1 schools (or decile 7 schools etc) will be the same in composition: decile level is a construct which combines measures of income and measures of education etc (see footnote on page 3). Hence comparing schools in relation to decile level, though an improvement on raw scores, is a crude measure of “added value” even if this debatable notion is accepted as meaningful (see footnote on page 14). Furthermore, it is obvious that Metro’s method of calculating added value is not nearly as sophisticated as that undertaken by Nash and Harker (1995).
- Despite the substantial adjustment undertaken by the *Metro* reporter, the relationship between decile level and student achievement is still quite striking eg there are virtually no scholarship passes in any decile 1-4 school; the highest performing decile 1 school comes in at rank 20 (and this is an anomaly to be discussed below) and the highest decile 2 school at 25 (and this, in its own way is also an anomaly: another Catholic integrated school.)

- There are, nevertheless, a number of surprises which the writer emphasises eg the exclusive private Kings College (Decile 10 in composition) come in at 63! (However, the data on which this is based are, to my mind, insufficient.)
- The writer notes that “Rankings are not a precise indicator.” (*ibid.*, p.36). To give one example of the misleading nature of the data, let us compare two decile 1 schools: De La Salle, ranking 30 and James Cook High School ranking 61. The relevant data regarding passes are De La Salle: NCEA 2, 20 %, NCEA 1 Merit and Excellence, 7.1%, Scholarship 0. James Cook: NCEA 2, 19.2%, NCEA 1, Merit and Excellence, 1.1%, Scholarhip 0. Thus a ranking difference of 30 places depends on a 6% difference in NCEA Merit and Excellence. It would certainly be quite wrong to suggest that one school is twice as successful as the other.
- Not all the anomalies can be discussed here but there are two which are interesting. Howick College (Decile 10) is ranked 72 of 77, on the face of it a disastrous result. Howick has faced considerable governance problems in recent years and ERO has recently conducted a special review which was very critical of the Board of the school but work would need to be done in examining the precise nature of the school’s clientele and internal relationships to claim an explanation for the low scores. The other outlier is particularly interesting being in many ways the exact opposite of Howick. **McAuley High School** is the top scoring decile 1 school ranking 20, well above many schools of much higher decile level. It is important to note, however, that most of its advantage comes from the achievement of its students in NCEA 2 (25% passes). Its achievement at NCEA 1, Merit and Excellence, is quite modest and it gains no scholarships. This may suggest a focus on moving all students through NCEA 2, with less concern for the high-flyer. McAuley is an integrated Catholic decile 1 girls school (years 9-13) with a role of 660. It is situated in South Auckland and is predominantly Pasifika. The principal and some staff of the school presented a paper at the Catholic Schools Convention in July 2009. Their account of the school is interesting (Miles et al, 2009). After documenting dramatic changes in examination results over recent years, they point to the instructional and assessment changes which the staff have initiated but make it clear that the changes did

not begin or end there: “Our first priority was to understand the worlds of our students. Professional Development by our Pasifika staff enabled staff to understand the pressures placed on our people by church commitments, family commitments, sport commitments, work commitments, friendships and finally school commitments. We had to enable our parents, students and staff to realise that a balance was needed to ensure that school work was valued. Our parents valued education and achievement, but failed to understand how absences affected results, how lack of healthy nutrition affected concentration, how ill health or faulty hearing or eyesight prevented learning, how punctuality was important, how the correct gear was needed to enable students to perform and how students needed time and space to do homework. *We had to bring our worlds together.*” (emphasis mine). They go on: “We have an excellent Health and Guidance centre, a social worker, guidance counsellor, two nurses, SENCO and RTLB all work towards supporting our students. In addition a strong dean network and pastoral care system strive to cater for the physical and emotional needs of our students. We have a chaplain to assist and support the special character of the college. Health assessments are completed for every year nine student. Our Health workers liaise with the wider community. For instance, ‘Mighty Mouth Dental Services’ visit the college and offer dental care on the site, the asthma and diabetes clinic visit regularly as do support people for the deaf and those with eye sight difficulties. The school has a close relationship with the local doctor who donates time to the college. Without the support of this health and guidance centre, the task of teaching would be more difficult and the difficulties faced by some of our students would not be identified. At all times we try to involve the parents and work as a partnership of parents, students and teachers. We actively seek funding support for our welfare budget and try to minimise the cost to parents.” They go on to point to other initiatives: parents were offered opportunities to study at no cost: courses were offered in adult literacy, numeracy, driving, and computing. So, if this school is to be regarded as a successful one (and it surely must be) the impressive results are not to be seen as dependent simply on changing teachers’ attitude or methods of instruction (though these are important) but in reconstructing the whole school in relation to the community it serves. And this is a tight community held together by

common ethnicity and shared faith. It would be perverse in the extreme to suggest that “any decile 1 school should be able to do the same.” One could come to understand the other outliers in the *Metro* article only by an indepth study of each school: its clientele, the nature of the physical environment, the community etc. And this New Zealand case study is in line with those others reported by Chenoweth in the USA. McAuley High School has been successful not by ignoring class and ethnic backgrounds but by facing them directly and (as I said) dedicating their energy to “**trying to compensate for the initial social disadvantage by replicating in and around the school the services which middle class children already get in and around their homes.**”

I can now suggest an answer to the question which I posed at the beginning of this article: “Can educational inequalities be removed by changes in the school or must they be tackled in the wider community?” The overwhelming weight of the evidence that I have assembled leads to a definite answer: enlightened principals can shape a culture of learning and focused teachers can foster individual achievement, but this is not enough. There must also be a change in the culture of the school and in the wider community. Bringing this about will seldom be easy and will probably often be impossible.

## **6. Conclusion:**

In conclusion, I want to draw out some lessons for New Zealand as we move towards national standards in primary schools.

1. While shared standards can be very helpful in helping teachers to focus on instruction and feedback, the dangers in the public release of information are enormous. It could lead to unfair comparisons between schools and contribute to lowered morale in teachers in the very schools which require extra dedication and hard work.
2. It is clear that the on-going professional development of teachers is a key to improved standards. In recent years there has been a tendency to reduce the finance for such development. Yet, without it, national standards are unlikely to

succeed. It is clear from the McAuley case that the education of parents is as important as the education of their children. And yet, there have been recent savage cuts to funding for Adult and Community Education which will hurt lower socio economic groups most and yet these are the groups whose children need special attention if they are to succeed. (It must, however, be acknowledged that McAuley's adult classes were financed from local fundraising.)

3. Educational policy should not proceed apart from social policy. It is clear that educational disadvantage and social disadvantage are closely linked: it is nearly impossible to improve educational achievement (especially "the long tail of underachievement") without also tackling the social ills (poor housing, poor medical care, poor diet) which accompany poverty.
4. It is particularly ironic that New Zealand which does not value or properly educate its teachers should nevertheless attempt to bully them into delivering superior results. If our policy makers were serious they would look to education in Finland where teaching is the most favoured profession (medicine is second), with only about 1 in 12 applicants selected. Teachers are well educated: a five-year Masters degree is required and teachers acquire in-depth knowledge of their teaching fields and social and global awareness. (Compare this to our three year degrees virtually denuded of content study and, in the main, of social awareness). Teachers are autonomous (no lesson plans, supervision or ERO-type inspections). No school results are published and there are no school rankings. All schools are well funded by the government and achieve results regardless of class background: the gap between the highest and the lowest performing schools is the smallest in the world. Not surprisingly in terms of the discussions in this paper, Finland regularly heads the OECD in educational achievement. It also heads the world in income equality and this is probably the key: an equal society achieves equal educational results.

For the final word, I cannot do better than David Berliner, who heads a research unit dedicated to these problems and has written much about them: "People with strong faith in public schools are to be cherished and the same is true of each example of schools that have overcome enormous odds. The methods of those schools need to be studied, promoted and replicated so that more educators will be influenced by their success. But these successes should not be used as a cudgel to attack other educators

and schools. And they should certainly never be used to excuse societal neglect of the very causes of the obstacles that extraordinary educators must overcome. It is poor policy indeed that erects huge barriers to the success of millions of students, cherry-picks and praises a few schools that appear to clear these barriers, and then blames the other schools for their failure to do so.” (Berliner, 2004, pp. 5-6).

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