

INCLUSIVE SCHOOLING AND COMMUNITY BUILDING – THE CHALLENGE OF ENSURING ACCESS AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION

Human dignity is the recognition that human beings, all human beings, are worthy of respect and esteem, not arising out of their socio-economic status or position of authority or some particular talent or ability **but simply by virtue of being human beings.**

It is the loss of dignity, of self-esteem, of self-respect, the sense in other words, of being second-rate, unimportant and powerless over one's destiny and the destiny of one's dependents that is the keenest, most deeply experienced pain of poverty. This is illustrated by something one of our Good Shepherd staff members at St Albans has said:

"People are thanking me when I give the vouchers out and I'm thinking, you shouldn't have to do that. Some of them are crying because of how bad they feel that they can't provide for their kids."

(Stafford, C. Shepherd's Voice Jan 2006)

Nelson Mandela has said:

"Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life."

(Nelson Mandela)

The often quoted passage from the 1971 World Synod of Bishops' Report "Justitia in Mundo" that states:

"Work for social justice is a constituent element of preaching the Gospel"

builds on the very famous commitment emerging from the Synod of Bishops in Medellin, Columbia in 1968 presided over by Pope Paul VI:

"Our conscience and the love of neighbour commits us to solidarity with the poor. This solidarity means taking upon ourselves their problems and struggles and speaking out for them."

(Poverty of the Church, Medellin, August 1968)

which in turn was born out of the spirit of Vatican II.

This led to the adoption by the Church of the 'fundamental option for the poor' - the imperative to adopt the standpoint of the poor, to begin to see the world and to shape its future course from the perspective and experiences of the poor.

Human dignity and the common good are the two starting points for all considerations of Catholic Social Teaching. The goal

of Catholic Social Teaching is social justice which is dependent upon society's commitment to the dignity of all and the common good of all. Access to education, health-care (including nutrition), meaningful employment within just industrial conditions and healthy, sanitary and affordable accommodation are the most commonly mentioned conditions underpinning human dignity in Catholic Social Teaching documents from Leo XIII to the present.

Poverty undermines access to these rights which are deemed essential to human dignity and the creation of a socially just society where the common good of all takes precedence over individual advancement and self interest at the level of nations as well as individual persons.

Poverty blocks the access to those elements such as education which is undoubtedly a key to extrication from the sentence of intergenerational poverty.

None of us is exempt from the work of eradicating poverty and, over and above this, if we choose to work in the Catholic sector, any part of it, our alignment with the Gospel is surely non-negotiable. And the Gospel is first and foremost "good news for the poor." The proclamation that is central to the Gospel - the proclamation that the Kingdom of God belongs to the prostitutes, tax collectors, to the unclean and ritually outcast was seen as scandalous. The passport into this Kingdom was just as outrageous for it was not predicated as before upon ritual purity, observance of law or membership of a chosen elite but now simply and starkly upon identification with the poor:

"Come take for your heritage the Kingdom prepared for you ... For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me; in prison and you came to see me"

(Matthew 25:31-46)

Looking at what we do as professionals, shaping and planning the way we do it, **must** be done from the standpoint of those who are disadvantaged, those who experience poverty and hardship, those who have been consequently deprived of dignity, hope, confidence and self-esteem.

Working for the eradication of poverty and the social exclusion and diminution of dignity which are a result of poverty, ought to be a non-negotiable benchmark for our work. It should be the filter we pass over all that we do. No human being and no Christian can be exempt from this.

This is especially true for those engaged in education at any level. In his "Dropping Off The Edge" report for Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Victoria, published last year, Professor Tony Vinson says:

"Few things are as strongly connected with social disadvantage and poverty as limited or deficient schooling."

(Vinson, T. Dropping Off The Edge 2007)

I am, I fully realise, not telling you anything you don't know by mentioning the abundant research into education and disadvantage, which provides very strong evidence to suggest that individual socio-economic status is the most significant determinant of student academic achievement in Australia.

This appears to be the case across all OECD countries but Australia has a particularly large and worrying gap in achievement levels between students from low socio-economic and high socio-economic backgrounds.

I have no doubt that it is possible to correct this abyss in educational achievement caused by poverty and disadvantage, largely through collaborative and creative action between sectors such as yours and mine. Finland, Sweden, Korea and Canada, amongst others, it appears, manage to achieve relatively high educational outcomes, containing the gap between schools in low and high socio-economic neighbourhoods to as little as 5% in performance variation in the case of Finland. So, quite clearly, it can be done.

At Good Shepherd, our conviction that education is the primary pathway out of poverty is unequivocal.

However, our own experience also convinces us that without parental involvement in their children's education, without parental, family, indeed local community engagement in educating children and young people, no long term, sustainable educational gains are possible. More about this and how together we might creatively engage families and communities, later.

When the stars align - when there emerges a renewed community determination to eliminate poverty or, at least mitigate its negative influences, and Governments concur and bring the fight against poverty to the fore, then it is incumbent on us all to seize the opportunity and to act with even greater commitment.

So, have the "stars aligned"? I think so.

The Jubilee Year of 2000 became a sort of international "line in the sand" against tolerating poverty, and brought about numerous advocacy and anti-poverty movements worldwide including the two most well known here - Make Poverty History and Anti-Poverty Week. The Millennium Development Goals espoused by Western nations, for the first time in generations promised hope, especially for Africa, in fighting poverty.

Hosted by British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, the leaders of the world's 20 richest countries, the G20, meet next month in London. Brown has made public his determination to ensure that the Millennium Development Goals sidelined by the World Economic Crisis, will be back on the agenda with special attention to making education and healthcare accessible to all children living in poor countries. In trying to keep the Millennium Development Goals on the agenda, Gordon Brown said last month:

"There is a shared interest in trying to build a truly global society that is founded on the principles of good neighbours. It is built on the idea that we have a duty to others and is driven forward by our commitment to tackle the problems of poverty, inequality, hunger, ill health and, of course, illiteracy."

(Gordon Brown interview in *The Tablet* 28th Feb.2009)

Here in Australia those committed to social justice have been encouraged by State Government initiatives such as "A Fairer Victoria" and more recently, the Federal Government's Social Inclusion Strategy which have put poverty once again on the public policy agenda.

The Federal Government's Social Inclusion Strategy is certainly multi-faceted but it is not complex or difficult to understand and is closely modelled, as we know, upon the Blair Labour Government's Social Inclusion policy initiative which has achieved much in the United Kingdom especially for children living in poverty.

In defining the objectives of the Federal Government's Social Inclusion Strategy, Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard, the Minister responsible for Social Inclusion, names education as "the centrepiece of this [social inclusion] agenda."

(Gillard, J. An Australian Social Inclusion Agenda 2007)

Although the emphasis for Julia Gillard has been access to universal pre-school education as a key to reducing disadvantage, it is clear that the centrality of education at all three levels is viewed as the key to participation in employment which is at the heart of the earliest agenda of the Social Inclusion Strategy. It is up for debate, of course, as to whether or not the key planks of the so-called "Education Revolution" will deliver equity for children from low income families. But it is heartening to hear Julia Gillard just this Monday announcing the Government's determination to aim for Year 12 completion rates of 90% with 20% of university places occupied by people from low income backgrounds by 2020. *The Age* report goes on to say:

" Acknowledging the scale of the challenge, she [J. Gillard] said it would require reform of the entire education system, from early childhood through schools and vocational education, and cultural change within families to nurture a love of learning in children."

(*The Age*, Tuesday, 10th March 2009)

Social inclusion then, can be defined firstly as action to negate the major barriers that result from poverty and disadvantage which prevent anyone from living dignified lives and participating fully in the systems and resources of society; and secondly the implementation of strategies that enable full participation: access to education, health care, affordable housing and employment.

But, it begins with education and if we get that wrong, we condemn children to the intergenerational poverty and exclusion highlighted by Tony Vinson's place-based longitudinal research.

We know from our involvement with families at Good Shepherd - and teachers at the front-line in low socio-economic neighbourhoods also know only too well - that the children and young people we are jointly involved with are:

- At least twice as likely to underperform in literacy and numeracy as students from the better off Eastern suburbs.
- More likely to live in public housing which is overcrowded and lacking in social networks and the resources available in wealthier neighbourhoods.
- More likely to truant, have very negative attitudes to learning, be expelled or leave school early.
- Unlikely to have educationally supportive home lives (not only because of domestic violence, substance abuse and other crises but even when these dysfunctions are not present, computer access, books and other resources are likely to be absent).
- Unlikely, as children and teenagers, to be able to escape poverty.

Their families are often single parent, unemployed or experience employment inflexibility and are time-poor. They are often uneducated themselves or have experienced trauma as refugees. They almost universally experience difficulties conversing with teachers who may be perceived as higher up the hierarchical ladder. They do not willingly involve themselves in the life of the local school.

Again, to quote Deputy Prime Minister Gillard:

"I want all Australians to imagine what growing up in such circumstances means for a child:

- Being chronically behind other children at school;
- Being constantly on the move from one rental home to another, unable to hold down friendships or, even worse, cycling in and out of homelessness;
- Missing out on the small but important things that other children take for granted - clothes, holidays, trips to the movies and school excursions.

For too many Australians, access to experiences and opportunities that are fundamental to their wellbeing and dignity are simply not available. In a nation as prosperous as ours this is both morally and economically unacceptable."

(Gillard, J. Address to ACOSS National Congress April 2008)

Indeed it is!

Such disadvantage and poverty, such inequity, is morally unacceptable and has lifelong implications for children from low socio-economic backgrounds.

In the long term, entrenched poverty results chiefly from labour market disadvantage with consistent periods of unemployment being the key cause of financial and social exclusion.

It is pretty obvious then that equity of access to quality education is the key to mitigating the causes of poverty.

So what, practically and locally, can we do?

The Meeting Point Project and, more recently the Standpoint Project give us a clue but they are only two stars in a sky that demands a Milky Way!

Whatever we do, there is abundant evidence, especially from overseas, that the most effective, long term and sustainable change occurs when we do things together - collaboration is the key. Meeting Point and Standpoint have collaboration, the close cooperation between sectors, as their foundation.

Essentially, these initiatives are about community building through the mobilization of resources that are often - but not always - already practically available in the school and local community. So, they are about collaboration for the Common Good.

Redressing inequity in educational outcomes because of low income requires a commitment to the Catholic Social Teaching principle of education as a public or common good rather than a private good and to which there ought to be a universal right of access no-matter what the resultant, perceived disadvantage to the wealthier in the community may be.

Philosophically, some, perhaps even some Catholics, might resist this principle of justice and equity which finds its ultimate basis in the Gospel itself. But, as many a footy coach would say: "they need to take a good hard look at themselves!"

And, obviously, such universal access requires more than just the physical capacity to attend school. Genuine access assumes no barriers to experiencing the full benefits of education because of socio-economic status, sex, religion, ethnicity or any other factor.

At least four things must happen if we are to address in a sustainable, long term way, the impact of poverty on education and if we are to enable education to be a significant driver in building healthy, socially just communities:

1. Teaching practices, classroom culture and school policies must change, where necessary, taking their starting point from the lived experience of children and families on low incomes.
2. Educators and social services professionals must work in close collaboration at the level of policy development and school and community based practice.
3. Parents, family groups and local communities must be involved in their children's education.
4. Advocacy for systemic change must be part and parcel of any collaborative enterprise.

The Meeting Point and Standpoint Projects provide us with invaluable learnings and directions. They are a springboard for future creative collaborative action.

Meeting Point came to birth as the result of a Seminar in 1998 which drew together a range of participants - including the Catholic Education Office and Good Shepherd - to share deeply felt concerns by schools and community Agencies around students missing out at school because of low income.

It was realised that access to government entitlements such as the EMA and emergency relief supports in welfare agencies, did little, in the long term to enhance positive educational outcomes.

It was further realised that there was great potential for change within schools themselves and that working together - schools and community service Agencies such as Good Shepherd - it was possible to increase schools' awareness of the experiences of families struggling on low incomes.

The Low-Income-Awareness Checklist was born from this Education/Community Services dialogue.

Here is how a member of the Meeting Point Project described the process at that time:

"A Low-Income-Awareness Checklist became a central tool in this work to assist schools to audit their curriculum, teaching and organisational practices in terms of equity for students on low incomes. When people on low incomes seek financial assistance through Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service, or talk with schools about help with education costs, they share stories about their children missing out. In Meeting Point, teachers and community workers have incorporated these perspectives, bringing the voices of the most vulnerable people to the consideration of the issues. The Low-Income-Awareness Checklist has presented other opportunities. In 2003 and 2004, the Brimbank Emergency Relief Network published the Checklist in a booklet on Education and Poverty and distributed it nationally for the Anti-Poverty Week campaign."

(Carmel Stafford: Good Policy Vol 2: No 2)

It was a modified version of this Low-Income-Awareness Checklist that was launched by Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard for 2008 Anti-Poverty Week.

Increasing the impact of the Checklist as a tool for change was a major impetus for the development of the Standpoint Project in 2006.

An action-research project between Good Shepherd and Victoria University's School of Education, the Standpoint Project used the Checklist as a conceptual framework to assist schools to re-evaluate the impact of their educational and organisational practices upon students and their families who were from low income backgrounds.

Two basic questions underpinned the Standpoint Project:

1. What are the practices and structures in schools that best support and encourage the participation and successful engagement of low income families in education?
2. And conversely: are there practices and structures that might deter or exclude some children and young people from full participation in education?

(Project Brief 2006 p.2)

The ultimate aim was to assist schools at every level, to take the standpoint of the most disadvantaged and to re-think school structures and practices explicitly from this standpoint.

(Project Brief 2006 p.4)

As well as a number of State Schools, two Catholic Schools are now participating in Standpoint and at the project's end later this year, the evaluation will make recommendations which the participant partners are committed to taking to appropriate authorities, including Government of course, for action.

How then, can we build upon the work and research achieved so far ***mindful of the fact that without action, exhaustion and cynicism replace enthusiasm and commitment*** in our teachers and community workers on the front line?

I will conclude by proposing a few practical ideas around the four things I mentioned earlier that need to happen if we are to build more inclusive and socially just communities. I will not spend time on the fourth - advocacy for systemic change - which speaks for itself and is something the Catholic Education Office and Agencies such as Good Shepherd are good at and do constantly.

Firstly the change that must occur in teaching practices, classroom culture and school policies. The Low-Income-Awareness Checklist is an obvious tool for schools to use as a benchmark for developing and reviewing school policies which especially impact upon children and young people from low income families. The Checklist can be used as a basis for ongoing school-based in-services and the basis for school policies which must be driven by a commitment to social justice and equity. At a more systemic level, constant review of teacher training and the introduction of courses such as those available to teachers at ACU, which sharpen consciousness in teachers and teacher trainees of the impact of poverty on the education of children, are vital. The training provided to teachers as Student Well-Being staff, an initiative of the CEO, is also to be welcomed. The Catholic Social Services sector possesses its own expertise of course in the area of social work, family support and counselling work and youth work and ought not to be excluded when planning and developing effective courses, in-services and training days for teaching staff or students training to be teachers.

Secondly and following from this, the importance of collaboration between professionals in the two sectors, education and social services. There is need for strong links to be made between schools and Community Service Agencies operating in the same communities as well as links at a policy level. Most Agencies such as Good Shepherd have strong policy and research arms. Good Shepherd, Jesuit Social Services and MacKillop Family Services have collaborated to create a new policy resource called "Esther's Voice" which is open to providing research and advocacy based on Catholic Social Teaching around various issues and barriers to education is one of its policy priorities.

At the local level, Agencies like ours can assist schools to build on the School Well-Being Staff initiative. Here is what a Principal at a Catholic School in the West has said:

"The Catholic Education Office does give funding for existing teachers to train and have teacher release time as student Well-Being staff which is predicated on withdrawing teachers from their classes. We also need access to trained Social Workers or Youth Workers that can provide services in the school, link it to the community and support parents."

(Principal, Crossing The Bridge, Education Foundation)

Our links into the community and into families in their homes enables staff from Agencies like Good Shepherd working closely with local schools to take the issues beyond the school gates and into the home. The issue of course is resourcing, advocating for additional funding, but such partnerships would build upon and value add to the work of the Well-Being staff in schools.

Consideration could also be given to the placement of final year (4th Year) Social Work Students in schools, supervised by a Social Worker from a Community Services Agency. Again, working beyond the borders of the school, following up school-based issues with students' families out of school hours has merit, I think.

And **finally**, parental and family involvement. Again, listen to another Western Suburbs Principal:

"We've tried many different things in the past and we'll continue to do everything possible, but we don't have much success getting parents involved."

(Principal, Crossing The Bridge, Education Foundation)

I think we would agree that without parental involvement in children's education and community involvement in schools, children and schools are at a severe disadvantage. So, schools as Community Hubs. Indeed this is not a new idea and there are schools pursuing it but it is, in general, a rather neglected idea. There are numerous models for re-shaping our schools as community centres offering educational and other services for the local community. Negotiating partnerships with Community

Agencies, local businesses, Governments and perhaps Philanthropic Trusts to support innovative arrangements is essential in my view.

Good Shepherd, for example, provides many services that are "non-welfare" and non-stigmatising such as parenting skills groups, peer support for new migrants and refugees, literacy groups and so on that we provide from our neighbourhood houses and which could very easily and appropriately be transferred to a school setting. This would bring parents and community members into the school for reasons other than their children's education providing a new perspective on the role of the school and opening up a new experience of school life and teachers.

Dignity as a human right eroded by the multiple disadvantages of poverty was our starting point. Building communities based upon Social Justice principles, which lie at the heart of Catholic Social Teaching, is our common goal. Equitable access to educational outcomes unhindered by the effects of low income is the pathway out of poverty. We cannot afford not to listen to each other, talk to each other and work closely with each other. Meeting Point and Standpoint have immeasurably advanced this conversation. It is for us now to continue to explore exhaustively every possibility, every idea, to give our children and young people from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds a genuinely fair go.