CATEGORIES
David Gonski, Education policy, inequality in Australian schools, inequity in schooling, Mitchell report, public schooling in Australia, School of Education at Western Sydney University

TAGS
Stewart Riddle

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Educational researchers unite to challenge inequality in Australian schooling

By Stewart Riddle

Educational inequality in Australia is persistent. One in four young Australians are now being left behind according to a recent report from the Mitchell Institute, evidence that school isn't working for many of our children.

We have one of the most segregated schooling systems in the world.

A large proportion of students attend private schools while public schools are becoming increasingly residualised. Families who can draw on significant cultural, social and economic capital are able to send their children to private schools with state-of-the-art performing arts and sporting facilities, and a promise of future economic prosperity and social success.

But four out of five children with a disability and 85% of Indigenous students attend public schools. Nearly 600,000 Australian children live in poverty and our public schools are struggling to cater for the majority of them, with limited resources. Former Prime Minister, John Howard, referred to public schools operating as a safety net, and in a sense that is what they are becoming.

The worse thing about all of this is not many Australians seem to notice much or care. As Professor John Smyth, one of Australia's leading experts in education, said recently, "it is probably no exaggeration to say that we are in the throes of a social epidemic that is going on largely unnoticed and un-debated, and is silently endured by those most affected."

Yet it needn't be that way.

Educational researchers form a network to challenge inequalities

Last month, I participated in a three-day research symposium hosted by the Centre for Educational Research and the School of Education at Western Sydney University. The symposium theme was Resisting educational inequality: reframing policy and practice in schools serving vulnerable communities.

Researchers working with disadvantaged communities, including high-poverty, marginalised and disenfranchised learners, came together to share empirical research and engage in critical conversations about understanding and improving educational engagement and success in disadvantaged communities.

The symposium program included papers addressing re-engaging disenfranchised learners, broadening diagnostic frames and understanding how inequalities are reproduced. There were sessions on enhancing engagement in the early years of schooling as well as initial teacher education programs geared towards high poverty schools. Whole school culture and student engagement, accountability systems, and alternative schooling models were also featured in the program.

The wisdom and experience of participants was inspirational. I felt privileged to be part of it all.

One of the outcomes of the symposium was the creation of a network of researchers working with low socioeconomic status and other disadvantaged schools and communities. The idea is to challenge the injustices faced by those who are least advantaged by the system. A clear commitment to social justice and reframing how educational policy and practice might better address the needs of vulnerable young people in education was evident.

Public schooling is the key

A healthy and vibrant public school system is the key to a prosperous and diverse multicultural society that is democratic, inclusive and can provide social, cultural and economic success for all of its citizens.

As the symposium highlighted, we should be talking more about access to a meaningful education and what this might look like for different students. The current focus on quality and choice in Australian schooling is not going to have much impact on the educational opportunities and outcomes for the least advantaged Australians.

As with most educational researchers, I believe the key for improving access and outcomes for all students is to provide greater resourcing for those most disadvantaged. A needs-based school funding model (as recommended by David Gonski) would be a very good start.

It's time to resist inequality

There is no doubt social justice lies at the heart of any attempt to address inequalities in educational access, opportunities and outcomes. We need to be having long, difficult conversations about what kind of society we wish to be and what kind of educational system will best fit.

While the symposium may only have lasted for three days, I was most heartened by some of the country's leading educational researchers committing to a more coordinated and dedicated response to resisting educational inequality in Australia.

Dr Stewart Riddle lectures in literacies education at the University of Southern Queensland. His research includes looking at the links between music and literacy in the lives of young people, as well as

alternative schooling and research methodologies. Stewart also plays bass guitar in a rock band called Drawn from Bees.

Stewart is a member of the English Teachers' Association of Queensland management committee and edits their journal, Words'Worth.

Stewart Ridde is presenting at the 2015 AARE conference in Fremantle, Western Australia, this week.

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2 thoughts on "Educational researchers unite to challenge inequality in Australian schooling"

Irene Buckler

November 30, 2015 at 8:09 am

Well said, Stewart. Now if we could only get influential and powerful people on-side, but that's the problem.

REPLY

Stewart Riddle

November 30, 2015 at 10:58 am

Hi Irene,
One of the main objectives of the network is to build better links between education research, policy making and practices. A key part of this is ensuring that the high quality research being done in Australia and elsewhere is made accessible to wide audiences, particularly policy makers. So yes, the intent is certainly to get 'influential' people on-side =)
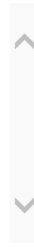
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