Entitlement to a Decent Education for All: An Argument for Equity

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Susan Groundwater-Smith examines what all children and communities are truly entitled to ...

This article initially addresses the relationship between notions of entitlement and equity as economic arguments. It goes on to suggest that in providing a decent education for Australia's school children the two closely related concepts should transcend the oft-cited fiscal case, that sets the level of government spending and taxation, and that such concepts have social and moral consequences. Thus consideration is given to a prime purpose of schooling being to develop active and informed citizens as argued for in the Melbourne Declaration and that teachers, along with their pedagogical roles, have a capacity, through their classroom practices, to assist young people in building their 'participative capital'. It is argued that this can be achieved when children and young people have a greater voice in their schooling experiences and become advocates for their own learning.

Key words: Entitlement, equity, social justice, inclusion, active citizenship, participation.

Introduction

In April, 2012, the then shadow Australian Treasurer, Joe Hockey, delivered an address to the Institute of Economic Affairs, The End of the Age of Entitlement, (Hockey, 2012). The address was seen as a watershed moment that was to inform economic planning specifically in relation to Hockey's first budget as Treasurer in May, 2014. His argument was based upon the notion that the nation can no longer afford to pay for the range of social transfers and services that were expected by the majority of tax-payers.

The problem, as he saw it, was that "entitlement is a concept that corrodes the very heart of the process of free enterprise that drives our economies" (p.3). He suggested that there has been a persistent belief that "one person has a right to a good or service that someone else will pay for [Hockey's emphasis]"(p.4). He quoted alternative South East Asian experiences such as those of Hong Kong where a sense of government entitlement is low. "You get what you pay for" (p.7) and went on to put the case that with a lower level of entitlement, businesses and individuals will be free to be successful. He indicated that basing provisions upon a notion of entitlement was to create an intergenerational fiscal handicap for decades to come. At no point in the sixteen page manifesto is there reference to the notion of 'equity' as understood within the field of education.

'Equity' is a slippery term (Groundwater-Smith, 2011). For most practitioners in education it is associated with concepts allied to social justice; that is to say that it is fair and reasonable for members of a given society to have their needs met in relation to those resources and opportunities that will enable them to achieve what Amartya Sen (2009) calls "wellbeing". In particular, citizens may become self actualised through participation in education and the range of social activities that will enable them to manage their daily lives. Indeed, it is this very concept of equity that is enshrined in the National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, known as the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) that makes a plea among other things for young Australians to become active and informed members of society.

- Goal 1 Australian governments, in collaboration with all school sectors, commit to promoting equity and excellence in Australian schooling.
- Goal 2 All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens. (MCEETYA 2008).

Problematically, the Melbourne Declaration is silent on the globally influenced, market-driven structural inequalities that have been seen to perpetuate much of Australia's educational equity concerns. Such concerns do not appear to find a place in current school reforms (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Reforms, for example, giving schools greater responsibility for self-management; high stakes testing and public ranking of school performances as manifest in the MySchool website, are seen to lead to increased competitiveness; all of which feed into a performance culture that may not benefit low performing and high needs students.

Generally there is agreement that transparency is important and schools should be accountable to all students, parents and the wider community, but it is the mechanisms that have been adopted can be seen as often-times crude and ill-considered. Thus when Bragg (2014: 312) quotes Hartley on the pitfalls of marketization and its consequences for those who are struggling and marginalized we can identify the inherent inequities in the process:

> It is important to raise questions about those who can and cannot shop, the hidden and not so hidden exclusions of consumer culture, and the demands it makes on us. Hartley rightly suggests that one risk of a marketised system is that schools and teachers 'hesitate to educate those children whose wherewithal cannot be relied upon to produce a good return' (Hartley, p123).

But, all of this is not to say that we cannot re-claim equity as a personal, professional and community value – and that it should be more than an aspiration, but an entitlement; but this is a difficult and challenging matter, particularly for today's educators.

Equity - beyond the economic argument

To be clear, there can be no question that meeting the needs of citizens has economic implications. Increasingly, the developed world has had its attention drawn to the gap that exists between the rich and poor. The OECD report, Divided we stand: why inequality keeps rising (OECD, 2011) indicates that the gap between rich and poor has widened with particular reference to inequality in wages and salaries. It is argued that where there are disparities in educational provisions then access to decent wages and broader social conditions will vary accordingly. This has been shown to be of particular concern in the United States, but now is increasingly on the agenda in Australia.

Not only that, but with poor, or inadequate access to education being able to be fully participative and included in society becomes limited with diminished opportunities to have a voice that can influence decision making across a range of enterprises. In its paper, Deep and persistent disadvantage in Australia, a Productivity Commission staff working paper (McLachlan, Gilfillan & Gordon, 2013) the claim is made:

- There is strong evidence to show that education is the key to improving life chances. Education not only provides skills and the capacity to learn, it improves a person's employment prospects and earning capacity. The evidence also points to a relationship between education and better health and social cohesion and reduced crime. In contrast, poor educational achievement increases the probability of poorer employment prospects, lower lifetime earnings and reduced ability to participate in society (McLachlan et al, 2013: 17).

As Reid (2012:11) reminds us education **is** a public good, **for** the public good and for the **renewa**l of the public. If equity, within the terms of social justice and inclusion, is to have meaning for us as members of the education profession then its pursuit is a significant and ongoing challenge.

Many decades ago the Whitlam government identified education as the cornerstone for equity and as such provided an opportunity to strive for a fair and just society (Reid, 2012). Whitlam argued that society as a whole was diminished when its citizens are denied a decent education. Gilbert, Keddie, Lingard, Mills and Renshaw (2013) saw the Whitlam years as a period that "systematized federal involvement around equity in the schooling agenda" (p.27). Through the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) that focused not only on the improvement of fundamental skills, but also upon making school more engaging and enjoyable for young people facing challenging circumstances, Australia experienced, albeit briefly, an era of promise and possibility. However, it has been suggested that there was an insufficient public discussion of what constitutes a 'just society' and 'democratic citizenship' and broad-band equity programs such as the DSP in the long run became subject to short term political vagaries.

Participating in our society – the voices of children and young people

Although economic growth is not independent of social and community development, it can be argued, then, that inclusion and participation is the route to the achievement of equity and the building of human and social capital. We can take the former, human capital development, to mean a nation's investment in its people for the purposes of economic growth, a matter much discussed. Social capital is concerned with building those social bonds that enable the connection of individuals to the society of which they are members. These purposes are irrefutable, but missing from the discussion are the ways in which both are enriched and enhanced by the participation of citizens, that is the participative capital that can be identified and nurtured through education. In this sense 'participative capital' relates to the capacity of members of society, citizens, organisations, to have a sense of agency and engagement in the making of decisions that affect them (McMurray & Niens, 2012).

While such agency can and does exist within families and the community, nowhere is it more able to be manifest than in the nation's schools. From the early years on it is possible for educators to create conditions whereby children and young people can take part in the activities of not only the classroom, but more broadly of the school, its management and organization. In effect school students have it within themselves to be advocates for the conditions of their own learning, not only that, but there exists an imprimatur that can legitimate such a role.

It has been noted by Mockler & Groundwater-Smith (2015) and Groundwater-Smith, Dockett & Bottrell (2015) that the most ratified United Nations Convention has been that associated with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) whose Article 12 states that 'Children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have their opinions taken into account'. The convention has been signed off by the Australian Federal Government and thus the voices of children and young people have been legitimated. But that is not sufficient for us to be able to claim that they have truly been heard.

How schooling can ensure that the voices of students are heard

Of course it is incumbent on all teachers to pay attention to the views and perspectives of their students; after all they are the 'consequential stakeholders' in the education process (Mockler and Groundwater-Smith, 2015). However, if we have as a goal enhanced equity in the processes by which students 'buy in' to their education then working with those young people, whose voices are rarely heard and whose access to participative capital is constrained and limited, becomes an important and challenging task. Some years ago, Richard Teese (2006:151) made a plea for schools facing difficult circumstances, as a contribution to equity, to "experiment and innovate in the interests of the children attending them and the system as a whole". He saw such schools as "vehicles of system renovation" an ambition that has only been partially realized.

Even so, we have examples of the extraordinary work that teachers of students in such challenging and often difficult circumstances, both economic and social have undertaken (Munns, Sawyer & Cole, 2013). Under the auspices of the Fair Go project, a research project carried out in New South Wales, participating teachers saw that their mission was to find ways of giving their students a fair chance. The project itself sought to identify a group of exemplary teachers across the stages of schooling and to investigate with them their professional and pedagogical orientations to practice, particularly in relation to their responsiveness to their students' needs, expectations and aspirations. All of the teachers in the study saw that encouraging and developing student voice is an essential requirement for their engagement in their learning. Threaded throughout the book are examples of ways in which teachers consult with their students and engage with them in productive dialogues about learning; what is being learned, how it is being learned, how practices may be developed and improved.

There now exists a considerable literature regarding the ways in which student voice has an increasing role to play in the development of participative classroom practices (see for example, Mayes, 2013). It is often characterized as a special form of participative action research (PAR) that acknowledges the agency of children and young people in contributing in meaningful ways to decisions that affect their lives. Such contributions not only require students to be consulted but also for them to be enabled to analyse inquiry outcomes and recommend action. In effect there are now efforts leading to a form of shared governance where teachers and learners work collaboratively to co-construct the learning and the learning outcomes, thus contributing effectively to a meaningful form of equity (Groundwater-Smith, 2011).

Conclusion

Thus this discussion has moved from an economic concept of entitlement, as spelled out by the Australian treasurer, to one of entitlement to participate as active and informed citizens, in particular as students in our schools. If, as Teese suggests this may lead in the longer term to more equitable outcomes, is yet to be fully tested. Nonetheless, it may be seen, in spite of facing a 'long walk' to equity that persistence may well win the day if we take our inspiration from Nelson Mandela (1995)

- I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger for my long walk is not ended.

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