Making Education More Equitable

What Can Policy Makers Learn from the Australian Disadvantaged Schools Programme?

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INTRODUCTION

The Australian Disadvantaged Schools Programme, the DSP, as it was known, ran from 1973 to 1996. It remains the second longest running anti-poverty in education programme in the world. Headstart, the early childhood support program established by the United States Congress in 1965 is the oldest and, unlike the DSP, is still in existence.

In this chapter I look at the DSP, its origins, progress and its demise, and I consider what can be learnt from it. This is a policy sociology analysis, but it is one that draws on personal experience as a school principal and as a policy activist, as well as being based in research in schools undertaken in South Australia in the late 1990s (Thomson 1999, 2002). My aim is to contribute to thinking about future policy agendas: the chapter highlights a set of issues that continue to bedevil education systems which aspire to making a difference to the depressingly constant unequal educational trajectories of working class children and young people.

The first section tells the story of the DSP, the second focuses on achievements and those things that were key to supporting and changing the schools that served the poorest communities in the country while the third and final section provides some pointers for future agendas.

It is important before beginning to signal some important features of the Australian education system.

Australia is a federation of states. The making of social and economic policy in Australia is embedded in the geo-politics of federal-state relations. The constitution, which underpins the Australian federation explicitly, gives the states the responsibility for schooling. The Commonwealth has a mandate for training and higher education and for the welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, newly arrived immigrants and refugees in particular, and for those suffering hardship in general. The school system in Australia consists of three sectors: the public or state schools, the Catholic school system, and independent schools.

Any national schooling strategy, including the DSP, was not only subject to the ongoing tussle between states, and between states and the Commonwealth, but also had vernacular interpretations in each state. Furthermore, from the mid-1960s
onwards, there was a continuing political struggle over the expenditure of federal public money on private schools, that is, Catholic and independent schools.

THE LIFE CYCLE OF THE DSP

The DSP went through four overlapping and blurred phases: birth, taking shape, growing up and running out of steam. These are discussed below.

Birth

In 1973 the first post-war Labor federal government was elected. Committed to a progressive socially-oriented politics, it initiated a broad and integrated strategy to attack social inequities which existed amid relative prosperity. A federal Schools Commission was charged with the responsibility of dealing with education and its fundamental class-based inequalities. The first report to emerge from the Schools Commission proposed financial assistance to private schools, intensive capital funding of state primary and secondary schools and the introduction of compensatory financial provisions to targeted groups of students who suffered deprivation and disadvantage, regardless of the sector in which they were based (Karmel 1973).

At around the same time most states, influenced by moves in the US and the UK to address educational inequality via compensatory policy strategies, queried the benefits of a two-tier system of schooling which divided children at the end of the primary phase into those destined for technical education and work, and those allegedly more suited to academic study. The classed nature of this system belied its rhetoric of meritocracy. Educational policy makers searched for solutions which, in most states, meant the abolition of technical high schools and the formation of comprehensives.

The DSP represented a coming together of two strands of policy concern:

1. national concerns – with poverty, mopping up the effects of the shift to a manufacturing-based economy, meeting increasing demands for better-educated workers, and ensuring that increasingly mixed working-class neighbourhoods were socially cohesive; and

2. concerns in the states – making limited funds meet escalating demands, making schooling less divisive and more comprehensive and giving more children ‘equal opportunities’.

The DSP focused on schools as the unit of change – not children, as did the Head Start programme in the US. It eschewed a simplistic focus on outcomes that might be shifted by an injection of funds in a mechanistic cause-effect relationship. It created a remit for changing the relationship between schools and their communities. It provided funding to the bottom tier94 of Australia’s school-age population, regardless of school sector and location.

94 This was measured using indicators of disadvantage, with census and welfare data about family income used to target specific schools with high concentrations of needy children.