

Stories from Within: Leadership, Learning and Lives in a High-Poverty School**Poverty and Education: An Introduction**

By most accounts, poverty in Australia is increasing (ACOSS, 2001; Brotherhood of St. Laurence, 2002; The Smith Family, 2001). As greater numbers of Australian adults live in poverty—of one sort or another—so to do more children (The Smith Family & NATSEM, 2002). In its more specific forms, poverty can be better described as poverties (see for example, Fincher & Saunders, 2001). Such delineations are important. These distinctions provide at least some evidence of an uncovering of the experiences of those who, in notable and often debilitating ways, live much of their lives differently to a majority of Australians. Importantly, explications of poverty show that many affected families' circumstances are especially harsh and, for example, have spilt into an intergenerational experience (Hunter, 2001). The separation of poverty into different forms holds the prospect that the contributing factors—and any exit points—can be more clearly grasped, especially by those who shape relevant public discourse and/or social policy.

At this moment in Australian history—if media reports are a guide—much of any public conversation on this growing feature of our society remains to be both said and seen. At the same time, references to issues of social class in the media have been rendered almost invisible (Scanlon, 2004). Yet, unemployed and underemployed plus single parent families comprise 3 in every 4 persons who are assisted by the St. Vincent de Paul Society (St. Vincent de Paul, 2001). The health of children (between 0 and 14 years) may be jeopardised due to living in a lone-parenthood situation, low income living arrangements or with unemployed parents (Travers, 2001). Drawing on Mather's (1994; 1995 and 1996) studies from the 1992 National Health Survey, Travers notes that there is a clear link between parents' unemployment and serious chronic health problems in children. These broad patterns of dependency provide more than a hint about particular class issues being connected to poverty. Moreover, indigenous Australians are disproportionately represented amongst those who live in poverty, regardless of which yardstick is used to measure the situation. In any case, Hunter (2001) argues that many conventional measures of poverty—and the implications often drawn from them by non indigenous individuals—fail to capture "the multi-faceted nature of Indigenous poverty" (p. 130). Further, Hunter suggests that case studies and personal accounts of indigenous experiences are needed because "poverty research

frequently runs the risk of appearing rather distant from the reality of poverty" (p. 131): Whereas relevant not-for profit organisations (Brotherhood of St. Laurence, 2002; St. Vincent de Paul, 2002) point to housing, isolation, education and health issues almost invariably being problematic in the lives of adults and children who live in poverty, Hunter's research shows that amongst those who are indigenous Australians, the consequences are especially bleak. Attachment to land, inherited wealth, and institutionalised racism in many areas within the labour market represent but a few of the issues which broadly point to the differences in indigenous and non indigenous cultures: If, by 25 years of age, nearly 50 per cent of non indigenous Australian males had been in jail there almost certainly would be a public outcry. It is a feature of indigenous life in Australia that is little known amongst the non-indigenous community and, in terms of school-based discourse, too rarely problematised.

On the basis of much school leadership literature (Bishop, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999; Leithwood, 2000; Mulford & Silins, 2001; Stoll & Fink, 1996; Stoll & Myers, 1998) it seems that particular practices by principals are apt in both 'privileged' and high poverty settings. Transformational practices from principals, for example, are likely to have appeal to teachers irrespective of their work locality because they promote collegial co-construction of vision, goals, structure problem-solving, learning requirements and culture (for fuller accounts see Leithwood, 2000; Silins & Mulford, 2002). However, in high poverty schools contextual factors may calibrate not only the way in which principals' practices foster collective meaning, purpose and learning but also teachers' perceptions of 'what matters most'. Put another way, teachers in high poverty settings may adjudge some worthy collegial efforts as of secondary importance to issues of fundamental relevance to them, such as classroom climate and student behaviour. At this point, more comparative studies between mainstream and high poverty school settings are needed to clarify the ways and extent to which contexts shape influential leadership practices (Keys, Sharp, Greene & Grayson, 2003).

The primacy of teachers feeling able to exercise control over their work and in particular, classes has long been a cultural feature of the teaching profession. Iterations of that norm of practice, however, have often shown the quest to be problematic amongst some teachers. Little (1982) noted that privatised teacher practice appealed to many within the profession yet in effect, 'at the closing of the classroom door', could deny students access to more sophisticated teaching and learning. Hargreaves (1996)

suggested that some teachers' views of students' abilities and entitlements resulted in exclusive teaching practices and the prospect of student inequalities being embedded. Goodson (2003) has also warned of the risks inherent in placing an over-reliance on practical knowledge that is atomistic and empty of a . . . "critical voice or moral purpose" (p. 131). At the same time, several studies have pointed to the damaging effects of overly controlling teachers' work and voices (Bishop & Mulford, 1996; Bishop, 1999; Blackmore, 1996, 2000; Rosenholtz, 1989).

Another aspect to the matter of teachers' perception of control over their work lives and, in particular, teaching, concerns the roles and influence of students. Rightly, there has been an increasing recognition of the need to promote student empowerment in recent times (Wood, 1998). However, if teachers are to provide an enabling environment where their efforts facilitate such empowerment, the classroom climate needs to be one in which relationships (student-to-student, student-to-self and student-teacher) are respectful and harmonious. Effective discipline needs to be appropriately exerted by both students and the teacher so as to enable social and educational learning to become a key feature of what happens in classes. Two recent Australian studies (Marks, McMillan & Hillman; 2001 Mulford, Kendall & Kendall, 2004) highlight the link between school climate and student academic outcomes.

One of the distinguishing features of high poverty schools (compared to others) is the number of distressed students who require support in multiple ways. Factors which contribute to this situation have been well documented: The National Health Strategy (1992) showed that members of low-income families have higher rates of chronic illnesses than members of high-income families. Hunter's (2001) study suggests that ". . . there is only a weak relationship between indigenous income and chronic health problems. In other words, amongst indigenous Australians, material affluence is not an effective shield against poor health.

Promoting professional learning, or organisational learning in schools, is increasingly regarded by many Departments of Education in Australia as a viable strategy for school improvement. Yet the literature which goes beyond endorsing the idea of leveraging intelligence in the workplace to empirically revealing the contribution of organisational learning to schools is modest. Successive studies by Leithwood (2000) and Mulford and Silins (2001) have produced compelling evidence of the links between leadership, organisational learning and student outcomes. Those investigations also shed light on how schools may capitalise on these factors, for the

benefit of students, in particular. Stoll, Fink and Earl's (2003) examination of learning communities provides a detailed and coherent account of this issue: How schools might comprehensively become or understand themselves as learning communities is also outlined. In terms of educators in high poverty schools, organisational learning has added potential: If high poverty schools are even more complex than mainstream schools (Sanders, 2000a, 2000b), the capacities of educators in the most challenging settings need to be developed so as to improve their own and students' lives.

In terms of poverty in Britain, Stoll, Fink and Earl (2003) note that ". . . 20 per cent of young people live in families below the poverty line Children in poor households attend school less often, have fewer educational opportunities, have poorer health and significantly lower achievement than their middle-class counterparts" (pp. 7-8). As alluded to by Stoll et al., the magnitude of educational challenges which inhere in high poverty schools requires a complementary degree of collective and individual intelligence from educators *at the site*. But that level of moral and educational commitment needs to be supported by system and inter-agency contributions which reflect and build on school-based understandings of students' experiences. As well, there is a growing need for relevant professional groups to play a pivotal role in elevating discussions about how students and staff in high poverty schools can be assisted to achieve more effective learning. Some, such as the Australian Principals Association have already done so, but more support is needed. One major contribution that professional associations could make is in relation to destigmatising of students who live in poverty. Such a strategy would require a long-term approach, but it is a 'here and now' social justice issue. It is also a deeply ethical and moral matter because poverty often has such lasting effects on students. By showing their leadership is marked by inclusion and a commitment to some of the nation's most vulnerable students, there also is a chance to shift some cultural views about high poverty schools within the teaching profession: Insufficient numbers of expert (Berliner, 1986) teachers want to work in high poverty schools. A critical mass of expert teachers *who want to work* in high poverty schools is needed so that students in those settings can gain access to more sophisticated learning and teaching. It is a dimension of school life that large numbers of middle class students have been fortunate to experience for much of their school lives.

This paper represents some of my experiences, which occurred between April 2000 and December 2003, when I was principal at Kismet Primary, a 'high poverty'

school in Tasmania. In what follows, my reflections may qualify for the research term autoethnography (Gergen & Gergen, 2002; Jones, 2002). Clearly, the experiences were mine but they are offered in the hope that they may encourage others within the Academy, Departments of Education central offices and teaching profession to give further consideration to not only those who work in such settings but also those whom high poverty schools are supposed to most directly serve—the students.

The Setting

'Kismet' Primary is a small school located less than 10 kilometres from the centre of Launceston, in northern Tasmania. At its peak (during my time at the school), the student enrolment was 260. Applying for the principalship at Kismet [a pseudonym] was the culmination of a very deliberate desire on my part—I wanted to work in a school that, amongst other dimensions, had a high indigenous population: Almost all schools with that demographic are high poverty schools. At one stage during my principalship at Kismet, 17 per cent of students identified as Aborigines. A snapshot of social statistics for the suburb of Kismet is shown below.

Suburb population	1649
ATSI	122
Born in Australia	95%
Married persons	39%
Separated/divorced	12%
One parent families	39.5%
Rented housing	69%
Household without a motor vehicle	21%
Annual household income	\$20,330
Births per year	30
Total population 0-4yr	188
Median age	24
Proportion of people aged 65 years and over	6.3%
Proportion of people aged less than 15	35.2%
Persons with higher degrees	0
Notifications of child abuse 0-4yr.	15.5%*
Persons employed full-time	40%

Unemployed persons % of labour force	31%
Persons left school under 16	78%

ABS, 1996

*Dept. Family Services

Prior to applying for the position, I had spent considerable time studying the social statistics for that area—so I had a strong picture of many circumstances that would likely prevail at the school. In addition, I held clear beliefs about the pivotal contribution which a changed (school) culture could make to school improvement. Having given numerous presentations to educators on that issue in the previous decade, I was keen to work with teachers, in particular, to shift the culture. In one sense I felt that Kismet Primary like most schools, needed to become 'less like a school'. Moreover, given that my doctoral research investigated trust between principals and teachers, I expected many of the fears and points of resistance from teachers (which almost inevitably occur when school change threatens) could be anticipated and, at least in part, dealt with ethically.

In my first year at Kismet Primary, I found the pace of school life, in terms of most colleagues' and my work, faster than what I had experienced in any other school. Having both begun my teaching career in the mid 1970s and taught in the western suburbs of Melbourne plus on the southern Mornington Peninsula (at a designated 'disadvantaged school') the pace at Kismet proved to be a surprise. By my fourth year, the pace had not subsided—only aspects of what contributed to that work intensity. A colleague who had previously worked at a youth detention centre said of the pace "It is just the same, the needs are the same pretty much, except that the resourcing is less." One of the dominant factors that contributed to the intensified work of educators' at Kismet concerned the nature of many students' lives. Before outlining how and why that was so, it is important to make some matters clear: There is a dilemma inherent in referring to minorities of all sorts—especially students or families who live in material poverty. It is also complicated when those observations come from a 'majority member', namely a white, middle class educator. The risk of essentialising those individuals and/or groups is, for me, ever present. As well, I am averse to portrayals of students (who live in any form of poverty) which rest on a deficit platform. Yet, to not speak or write about the pernicious and unfair effects of poverty—in terms of students' education—risks leaving issues associated with high poverty schools in the background.

At this point in our nation's history, too little is known about contemporary high poverty schools.

Having grown up in material poverty in the 1960s and early 1970s, I believe that today's equivalent is much harsher, and more often marked by an absence of hope. Maurice Galton's (2004) observations of students in high poverty schools in England suggest that there is evidence to support my assertion. For example, Galton argues that the prospects of students from high poverty schools in England now being able to go to a university are poor.

Diminishing Life Chances

In terms of this paper, I do not wish to elaborate on why and how large numbers of young Australians from working class and materially impoverished backgrounds gained access to the tertiary sector during the 1970s. Of greater moment are the diminishing chances of many students who live in poverty effectively moving through primary and post primary schools so as to be able to access a tertiary education. Jordan and Plank (2000) suggest that disproportionate numbers of students with low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds who are 'academically able' to continue on to tertiary education, fail to do so. Factors associated with differences in social capital between high SES and low SES are highlighted by Jordan and Plank in an effort to underscore the complexity of the challenge to reduce institutionalised (social and academic) effects of poverty on students. Many taken-for-granted ways of living amongst middle class families do not match the experiences of students who live in poverty. As Jordan and Plank's study shows, those differences can often leave students who live in poverty at a disadvantage, especially in terms of being able to access a tertiary education. "Because of the concentration of poverty and the small proportion of parents who attended college, the amount of information about postsecondary opportunities, and thus, the guidance families are able to provide their adolescents without assistance is limited" (Jordan & Plank, p. 108).

If the stories of other educators in high-poverty schools are a guide, much of what typically characterised a day at Kismet Primary was not unique. However, in comparison to schools in more affluent suburbs, those events were extraordinary. The most fundamental distinguishing feature of Kismet—when compared to most Australian public schools—was the number of distressed students. Teachers in particular learned this about the student population very shortly after starting work at Kismet.

Many teachers voiced views similar to this teacher, who commented to me:

So many of the children here have really pressurised lives, it makes things really tough for them. Some of them become so hardened at such a young age. [8-year-old student] looks like an old woman most days, she seems so weighed down by worries.

Another teacher who had taught at Kismet for nearly 8 years brought her new class to the school for an excursion in 2002. Just before leaving Kismet, she observed:

I had forgotten what it was like here—when I visited the school this morning, I realised so many of the students looked like 'street kids'. It is amazing what this school does. But I know I left just in time. The emotional stuff takes a toll.

Between 2000 and 2003, most of the teachers who were based at Kismet had previously worked in other schools. Earlier teaching appointments had provided those colleagues with valuable professional learning experiences plus a means of developing expertise. Those postings also stood, in the minds of teachers, as stark contrasts to the Kismet context. Whereas all of the 'experienced' teachers claimed to have had one or two 'challenging' students in the classes they had taught in other schools, none of them had previously worked in grades where as many as half of the students could be deemed as being 'placed at risk'. Typically, teachers would claim Kismet Primary 'was like no other school'.

In addition, of those Kismet students, most lived lives out of school that were marked by considerable stress. The factors which were at play—included insufficient regular meals, violent homes, distressed parent/s, poor sleep patterns, and aggressive neighbours. Usually the most distressed students 'carried' several of these factors and had done so for much of their short lives. Of that weight, one teacher aptly summarised what many colleagues had noted: "these kids are amazing, given what some of them have been through and what they have to deal with. Had I never worked here, I wouldn't have believed it. But I love working here."

Of course, in most schools there are students whose lives are governed by several of these circumstances. But in a majority of schools such a 'critical mass' of students is absent. For those schools, other social and educational challenges flow from having a small number of students who live in poverty. As one former Kismet teacher (who now works in a middle class school) told me "When we get really troubled students, class teachers are less equipped to deal with them as most of our students are strong learners, contented and get along well with others". Based on her three years of

teaching at Kismet Primary, she was sure that the school, relative to the contexts in which it operated, ". . . did extraordinary things for students".

As with all schools, the pivotal vibrancy of Kismet was to be found in its students. Each student had numerous qualities and, as a group, they displayed a notable openness toward caring adults. When visitors came to the school, they frequently remarked about the friendliness of students who would approach and acknowledge them in the playgrounds. At Kismet, as with other schools, teachers' greatest source of job satisfaction usually came from their students—both in terms of liking them and contributing to their educational progress. Indeed, as elsewhere in the school system, the teachers who most prospered at Kismet Primary were those with a deep affection for and professional commitment to each of the students. Regardless of the personal circumstances of students or whether they 'acted up', those teachers showed an almost unrelenting willingness to provide the best possible class environments and learning experiences for students. As well, they respected students not only through their face-to-face interactions with students but also in how they spoke about them to colleagues. The teacher-to-teacher discourse in relation to troubled students often revealed an emphasis on understanding their lives so as to make learning experiences more relevant and meaningful.

Special Children, Special Teachers

Such teacher dedication is neither new nor limited to high-poverty schools: Historically, outstanding teachers have crafted excellent relationships with their students and deliberately sought to learn about them as individuals. One distinct element at Kismet was that those teachers did so in the face of a work setting which was intense and often 'punctured' by the outpourings of distressed students, colleagues and/or parents. A teacher in her first year at Kismet reflected:

I'm not really sure if I'm cut out for this place. I think it takes a special sort of person to work here. It is just so frustrating with some kids who continually play up. But I keep coming back, so that is something I guess.

Last year a relief teacher, who mixed with many teachers at other schools, commented on some 'outsiders' ideas of her work at Kismet:

Last week I went to [a 'middle class' school] to apply to do some relief teaching. When I told them I had done a fair bit of relief work at Kismet Primary, one of the teachers basically said 'why would you want to put yourself through that?' The other

teacher then said 'well at least you'll be used to problem children. I now get plenty of work [relief teaching] at that school.

Another teacher's comments echoed the stereotyping extended to Kismet Primary from colleagues who did not teach at the school:

Yesterday at [a nearby venue] was a great professional learning day, I learned an enormous amount. But when we [teachers] got into small groups to work, and we had to introduce ourselves, one teacher screwed up her nose when I said where I worked. Another then joined in and said 'why would you work there?'. I told them how good it was and how much I enjoyed the students but they were clearly unimpressed and not convinced.

During my time at Kismet, few expert teachers sought to transfer into the school. Most teachers knew this fact only too well.

Schools such as Kismet are not places for all teachers. Yet in mass schooling systems such as public education, the industrial rules governing teacher transfers and appointments fail to grasp that significance. Students in high poverty schools who find themselves with a class teacher who does not enjoy the job or is unable to be an effective educator—can pay a potentially huge price in that situation.

As with all occupations, there is a small cohort of educators within the teaching profession who do not seem to enjoy what they do and/or are ineffective: They are scattered throughout public and private education systems, both in Australia and overseas. It is difficult to imagine that the teaching profession could ever be quarantined from a feature that exists in all areas of the labour market. However, while students with high cultural and social capital may suffer the effects of a dissatisfied, disinterested or inexperienced teacher, their personal and family resources often act as a buffer to those situations. In many instances, parents of those students are acutely aware of what should be happening in classrooms and approach the school principal or teacher so as to have their child's needs met. Often times, parents who have cultural and social capital know highly effective ways of communicating concerns and expectations to educators in order to achieve what they want from schools; by contrast, those with low social capital may not have effective negotiating strategies, as the following demonstrates:

Thanks to you, you [expletive] [expletive] you have ruined his life. He is going to go tonight [to the student celebration] whether you like it or not. You are a [expletive] dog. This has ruined his life. You are not going to do this. I'm going to teach you a lesson. [These were the loud, opening comments from an angry parent sitting in

her car as she dropped her son at school when I informed her that her son had been suspended: The student's suspension was a result of him calling a student a 'nigger' at the previous day's interschool sports meet. No amount of words from me—including acknowledging her disappointment with the suspension—could reduce her anger. The frustration was heightened because her child's suspension was effective immediately and meant that not only would he miss school that day but also a student dinner and dance event that evening. So agitated was she by my decision that the tirade continued in between yelling at her son to get back into—and sit still—the car. The verbal abuse was maintained well after I had explained details about a return-to-school date plus the legal obligations of parents of suspended students and walked toward the front office. As I stood at the entrance to the school administrative block, the parent rushed out of the car, toward me. Enraged, and shouting threats, she threw off her windjacket and her thongs. Her teenage daughter also leapt from the car and ran up the steps. Both were yelling abuse and threatening to 'fix' me. It was a rare moment at Kismet Primary—I really felt that I was going to be physically attacked. Standing my ground seemed to help—and I was only pushed. Nonetheless, their behaviour caused distress—one staff member who witnessed the event hid in the nearby boys' toilets and two courageous colleagues closed the internal entrance doors to the administration block.]

This condensed version of one hostile parent's reaction to being required to accept the consequences of her son's racist slur was not typical of the parent behaviour at Kismet. However, it was an example of bullying and abuse that was directed at school personnel on numerous occasions by a small number of parents. Those 'repeat offenders' appeared to feel unrestrained by the dominant school culture—where a majority of parents showed themselves to be co-operative and constructive at Kismet Primary.

In high-poverty schools, some parents are neither able to emulate such scrutiny or skilfully advocate for children. That absence of cultural and social capital does not justify any school providing 'second-best' learning. However, it did contribute to an impression for a small number of students at Kismet that their parents ". . . couldn't care less". In terms of a broader view of schooling, the absence of socially and educationally 'savvy' parents often leaves particular student voices and interests silenced. It can also be 'mis-read' by teachers (who are in high-poverty schools but have only a limited affinity with their work and/or students) as providing a safe context in which to provide an exclusive form of learning.

Teachers who verbally label students in ways that ignore their sovereignty are, fortunately, a minority. Nonetheless, such ignorance and disrespect was apparent at Kismet on many occasions. Describing students as 'feral' or mocking their outward appearances reflects lower-level thinking by educators in an era when, in terms of leadership, professional learning and curricula, the trend is increasingly toward privileging higher-order thinking. The act of diminishing students, I suspect, is self-serving insofar as it shifts the problems and challenges inherent in teaching and learning, further on to the shoulders of students. The following revealing comment was relayed to me by a colleague the day after she had made it:

At the parent-teacher meeting last night I told Mrs. Smithers [name changed] that my grade was the dumbest group of students I had ever taught. She was shocked when I said it, but she knew I didn't mean [her child] Philip. She needed to know because she was asking about standards. I told her that Philip was one of the few in class who were at grade level. I told her I couldn't explain why this was the case, except that most of the students came from [the suburb of] Kismet. That's all I could say.

Pleasingly, at Kismet Primary, a couple of pre-service teachers who heard students being inappropriately cast by teachers, reported their concerns to me. The information served as an impetus to conversing with the relevant teachers on the matter, plus shaped the professional learning which was subsequently provided. In a few instances, during my time at Kismet, teachers did not change their dismissive discourse, underlining the view that cultural change can be a long-term proposition. To its credit, most members of the teaching profession are able to grasp complex school settings and aptly aim to understand—rather than simply measure—problems.

One of the key points to make about Kismet Primary parents is that the vast majority were affable adults who wanted their children to have a 'good education'. On the occasions when they spoke with teachers about concerns, most made requests that were reasonable and justified further investigation. In that respect, parent interests departed little from those which typically occur in 'middle class' schools. By and large, parents at Kismet Primary were not actively involved at the school in terms of being 'classroom helpers' or members of a committee. There were at least several explanations for that situation. Substantial numbers of the parents had, themselves, left school prior to the end of Year 10. Many commented to me that they did not enjoy their schooling and often still felt uncomfortable in schools. In addition, a small number of parents could not read, and felt that they could not join in class activities to hear students read.

Kismet Primary arranged for a couple of parents to join adult learn-to-read classes in the city.

Because many parents had a limited grasp of school curriculum, they were in a position of having to rely on their children's teachers to ensure that quality learning experiences were provided. Whereas in more materially affluent suburbs parents might quickly approach the school teacher or principal with concerns about what was—or wasn't—happening in a class, at Kismet, many parents were in a position of having to invest greater trust in school personnel. For a small number of parents, it was a degree of trust not easily extended: They were wary of most government institutions, including schools and, for example, no staff member at Kismet lived in the suburb. In addition, almost all Kismet Primary personnel were fully employed, owned (or were paying off) their homes and drove late-model cars. Without staff having to utter a word, in the eyes of some parents, we stood apart from the community we sought to serve. Although it was impossible to neutralise those distinctions which fuelled resentment in some parents, staff endeavoured to be welcoming of parents and highly approachable. Nonetheless, in occasional but telling outbursts from a few parents, those differences were highlighted. Materially affluent parents at the school also were variously cast as 'snobs' or 'posh bitches' in the abuse. One parent's views typified the divide: "That lot [parents who are actively involved in the Parent Association] are toffs. They're snobs and bitches. I wouldn't mix with them. They don't live in [Kismet] and neither do you or the teachers.". In the three quotes below, some further parent views which represented common themes in parent conversations with me during my time at Kismet, are given:

I think I understand what you are trying to do here and I greatly respect both you and the teachers. But I have decided to send my children to [another school]. I don't want them to see all these distressed children—I want them to keep their happy childhoods.

I have been extremely pleased with the education my child has received at Kismet. My husband went here and I think it is good for children to see all sorts here. [My daughter] hasn't suffered. Quite the opposite, I think it has helped to prepare her for life.

We seem to be getting more and more unhappy children from disturbed families. And the [middle class] kids from up the river don't go here any more, except for a few in grade six. It worries me in terms of my child especially.

Expert teachers who enjoyed working at Kismet Primary were often in an advantageous teaching position compared to, for example, enthusiastic novice colleagues; having developed an extensive knowledge of students and curriculum plus ways of interacting with them in schools provided considerable efficacy. Most of the novice teachers who worked at Kismet in my four years at the school approached their teaching and the students with enthusiasm. They also showed themselves to be extremely hardworking. However, on numerous occasions their best efforts in classes were blunted by having to deal with one or more extremely defiant students. As one 'first-year' teacher observed: "Some days I don't feel like I have done anything in class except behaviour management. It is very unfair on the students who want to learn". If novice teachers are to work in high-poverty schools it should be against a backdrop of having a critical mass—preferably 80%—of expert teachers on staff who want to be at the school. Such a profile can enable better mentoring, coaching and professional learning to occur 'on the job', at the site.

Another reason why expertise counts for so much in high-poverty schools is because the student learning almost invariably needs to be strengthened. To do so, as is the case in all schools, requires some commitment and involvement from students' families. In high-poverty schools, the extent of mental and social health amongst parents is often precarious and, in broad terms, more problematic than amongst parents in 'mainstream' settings. Under those conditions alone, it is likely that the challenge of involving most parents in high poverty schools will be a long-term prospect. Nonetheless, at Kismet expert teachers who enjoyed working with students from high-poverty contexts often were quite effective at helping students both learn and unlearn. As unlearning can be a more arduous exercise than learning, their expertise strongly assisted students' social and academic learning.

The Future: There *are* Better Ways

In addition to a growing literature on poverty in Australia, there is recent research which examines high poverty (or similarly described) schools. Although referring to contexts, people and the history of 'mass' schooling in the United States, Sanders (2000a) argues that ". . . some populations have been better served by this nation's educational system than others" (p.xv). Further, Sanders notes that students from materially poor and other minority families continue to be placed at risk by poor resourcing, less qualified teachers and a marginalised position within the larger society. Sanders (2000b) argues

that the prospects of students, (such as those from high poverty backgrounds), who have been underserved by schools will depend on how well educators, researchers, families and communities direct their attention toward gaining additional resources for " . . . schools that serve large numbers of these students" (p. 363). In addition, at a national level, policy needs to be strong *and*, for its effective implementation, ensure that adequate support is provided at the school level. Such support includes professional learning for school-based educators so as to build capacity and foster their commitment to change. Differential learning experienced by black and white students as well as by those from different social classes who are in the same classrooms, are grounds, in Sanders's view, for further attention being directed to the quality of schooling: Both the educational and wider community need to understand better why these marked social and academic disparities can emerge from the same classrooms. The matter is especially important given that standardised tests are used to assess all students in specific grade levels of Australian public schools. Of further note is the evidence from Amrein & Berliner's (2003) investigation of high-stakes testing in eighteen states in the United States which " . . . shows that such tests actually decrease student motivation and increase the proportion of students who leave school early" (p. 32).

The matter of schools engaging with their communities and, in particular, the families they serve also is identified by Sanders (2000b). In multiple ways, such school-family connections enhance the educational prospects of students who live in poverty. Other investigations (for example, Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders & Simon, 1997; Silins & Mulford, 2002) have emphasised the value to students of schools having robust links with their parent population. Such engagement is important in high poverty school communities—but aspects of the strategy may not pay off in the short term.

In pre-service teacher education programs and teachers' professional learning initiatives, greater attention needs to be given to developing an understanding of students who live in poverty. Sanders's (2000a) suggestions in relation to pre-service teacher education rest on notions of equity and social justice. However, she also indicates that improving the lives of those students—and high poverty schools—is in the interests of the larger society. Hence the arguments posited by Sanders run along two lines: For reasons of fairness and inclusion, students who live in poverty need to be better served by public education systems: The advantages which would flow from such an ethic should provide for a more vibrant society. On the other hand, a failure to do so will, almost invariably, lead to manifold social traumas.

Conclusion

Families and children who live in high poverty circumstances require more support so as to enhance both their life chances and prospects in a knowledge era. In turn, schools—and especially those with large numbers of materially impoverished students—require additional recognition and support from all sectors within, or linked to the profession. If, as a nation, Australia does not face the issue of students (who live in poverty) and their learning, the consequences are likely to be substantial. Those students will suffer the most severe penalties—some of them may never enter the labour market. However, our nation will truly be the poorer for not having courageously and generously co-ordinated efforts to attend to this area of social distress. After all, it is a place where few of us would like to be.

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