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Social inclusion: Innovative reform, policy manoeuvre or a bit of both?

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In the early days of this century the South Australian government followed Tony Blair's New Labour in its take up of social inclusion as a key reform agenda. Here as in the UK social inclusion was seen as a way out of the cul de sac into which campaigns for social justice appeared to have become stuck. In particular the state public schools were urged to adopt social inclusion as a central focus, perhaps most evidently in the government's repeated emphasis on the need to improve school retention. This paper traces the meanings of social inclusion in the context of state schooling in South Australia. Using data drawn from an investigation of Social Inclusion in South Australian Primary Schools the paper raises questions about the concept and its suitability as an instrument for the reform of educational systems and structures. Ultimately the paper concludes with a discussion of the needs of school leaders and teachers in order to implement the social inclusion initiative effectively.

Keywords: Education Policy

Introduction

In South Australia there have been a number of initiatives in recent decades which were designed to lessen the differences in educational outcomes that are connected to differences in family background. The dimensions of these differences include, among other things, wealth, educational level of parents, language and cultural differences, ethnicity and race, physical abilities and gender. Many of the reforms were focused on the notion of disadvantage (such as Priority Projects – in other states known as the Disadvantaged Schools' Project), and they took their place within the rhetoric of social justice. Their orientation was to the schools and families where there were clear indications of need, schools whose outputs were demonstrably below those of other schools in different areas, or with different populations. A good deal of time, energy and professional attention was devoted to these programs. In addition, these interventions were taken from the position of doing something *to* a group, a particular school or an area, the latter being the beneficiaries of the action. While the initiatives

achieved many commendable results, the differences in schooling outcomes continue to be a cause of concern. It seems that there is a need to do more than simply provide resources to disadvantaged areas if we want to work towards the elimination of social differences in schooling outcomes.

Meanwhile the forces of globalisation have generated an increased awareness of the gap between countries and people who can take their role as players on the world stage and those who cannot. With the general turn towards economic rationalism throughout the western world during the 1990s these differences have become more clearly defined. Within Australia our state, South Australia, has become increasingly recognised as facing very particular problems in terms of economic progress. We have been made newly aware of the need to work together if we are to help to build South Australia into a sustainable and capacity rich community. Education is clearly a key to this endeavour.

These two features – the history of past efforts to target disadvantaged schools for resourcing and personnel and the forces of globalisation and economic rationalism – have led to a re-thinking of the ways in which schooling can serve to create a revitalised notion of community. This re-thinking has led to the adoption of social inclusion as a key aim for South Australia in general. The project described in this paper constitutes one attempt to develop the ideas of social inclusion in ways that may be useful and applicable in schools and classrooms. Rather than thinking in terms of doing something to a particularly targeted group, a social inclusion perspective requires that everyone in the group take an active part in building a more inclusive community. This means those we might term advantaged as well as those who might be known as disadvantaged.

 Origins of the current social inclusion movement

The story begins in Britain with the election of Tony Blair and the Labour Party after the long years of Thatcherism. The present Blair government's initial wave of success derived in part from the attention it focused on social exclusion – the ways in which certain sectors of the British people were routinely marginalised from accessing education, secure employment, a good standard of living and so on. Blair committed his government to remedying this situation and in doing so he opted for social

inclusion, a key term in his platform (along with education). Of course the term social inclusion itself denotes its binary opposite – social exclusion - and so meanings derive from the continuum between inclusivity and exclusivity (Doherty 2003).

In its outline of *Labor's Social Inclusion Initiative* the South Australian Rann Government has explicitly taken up Tony Blair's New Labour narrative. The term *social inclusion* resonates within a paradigm of European social democracy and especially with efforts to build the new Europe in terms of the one economic community. There are evident parallels with multicultural Australia and the need to grow a sense of belonging along with the recognition of difference. The practice of social inclusion goes beyond the idea of righting deprivation by redistribution of wealth, the strategy of successive earlier British attempts to redress inequality in a liberal society (Duffy 1995). The Rann manifesto sees the latter paradigm as having ineffectually informed the social policy and social strategies of the former Liberal government in South Australia. The current initiative is dedicated to fostering inclusivity at all levels of the society.

Social inclusion only makes sense when its purpose is defined as creating a 'prosperous, fair and inclusive society' (*Making the Connections* 2003, foreword). Its dynamic is accordingly not just sporadic remedying of transient social ills; social inclusion points to a future society where deprivation in all its forms is no longer a viable factor. Individuals and groups are included in this ideal society by strategies that, according to Premier Rann, must incorporate the whole of government and whole of community.

> *Without investment in inclusion – investment to reduce social dislocation and ill health, and to increase the capacity of socially disadvantaged areas to improve their situation – our future will be economically as well as socially burdened. To shape the future we want for ourselves and our children, South Australia must create a strong and cohesive community and use its social, economic and environmental resources in a sustainable fashion.* (ibid., p. 12)

Hence the government is looking to schools as social institutions to help shape the future by actively modelling the principles of social inclusion in their functioning and to promote the concept explicitly in their daily practice.

What is social inclusion?

Social inclusion, envisaged as operating to generate a strong and cohesive community, represents an ideal in which all of society is involved. This broad participation will mean that all people will have a say in determining their futures – for themselves and for the society in which they live. Social inclusion goes beyond the right to vote and elect government in a democracy – it relates to all the interconnected social institutions that are involved in social life. Hence social inclusion requires the accomplishment of social participation and social integration in those organizations and communities whereby participants might achieve power over their present and the future. Such organizations and communities would include trade unions, local communities, the professions and even the national community with its rights and associated obligations (see Room 1995).

In particular, primary and secondary schools have an evident and important role, both in modelling inclusive environments and in preparing young people to take their place as participants in the broader community. For many young people schools constitute the first experience of a social organisation outside of their home. As such schools have a great responsibility in inducting young people into understandings of the broader society. It is therefore incumbent on schools to respond to this new vision of an inclusive society and to demonstrate the application of this vision in their daily processes. To be excluded from school already entails future exclusion from other societal organizations, since schools feed into so many of them. Social Inclusion directives clearly emphasise strong school retention and full participation in the interests of enabling all citizens to live a decent life. The minimum requirements for life in an ideal society would be secure employment, good health care, equal chances in education, relief for households in need and the assurance that all children will have a good start in life.

Social inclusion combats lack of social opportunity. Instead of providing a remedy for individual problems by increasing, for example, disposable income or implementing

new resources, it aims to establish or restore social opportunity to those who have little or no sense of social cohesion. Enabling social opportunities is the key element in social inclusion. Important central opportunities in this sense would be access to employment and educational achievement (Giddens 1998). Social inclusion does not directly combat such things as poverty or racism or monoculturalism or gender inequity. In other words, social exclusion is not the same as deprivation, even being multiply deprived (Giddens 2000). A socially inclusive society would probably still contain variations in wealth, there would be ongoing issues around disability, race, ethnicity and so on. But in an inclusive society these markers of deprivation would not entail a lack of opportunity to access rights and services and the good of the whole society would depend on the shared understanding of the proper availability of these opportunities.

The terminology relating to 'opportunity' has been explicitly taken up by the Rann government in relation to the concept of social inclusion.

> *Labor's twin pillars of opportunity and security will underpin our*
> *entire social policy agenda and our Social Inclusion initiative will be*
> *its engine room.* (*Labor's Social Inclusion Initiative*, p. 1)

And in particular education is seen as key to the progress of the social inclusion platform. The first plank of which is the effort to improve retention in schools.

> *This (a new strategy to increase school retention rates) is a wide*
> *ranging program of actions and changed approaches to assist young*
> *people to stay at school longer and be connected to opportunities for*
> *learning, employment and active participation in the life of our state.*
> (*Making the Connection*, p. 4)

Social exclusion or lack of social opportunity, whereby people feel trapped in deprivation and locked out of the chance to provide for themselves and for their family a rewarding and secure life, is caused by a number of factors. On a broad scale, there are first of all harsh and unjust economic conditions. In a global economy such conditions can occur much faster than ever before. These are compounded by difficult social environments and their effects are made more severe when government policies do not see the need to intervene positively and effectively.

Social inclusion and primary schooling

The primary school is a social institution, access to which is essential for social cohesion. While the primary school has been long understood as the arena for basic training in socialisation – in other words it is the place where children learn to get along with one another and to behave in ways that are acceptable in school – the current emphasis on social inclusion takes this aspect of schooling further. Schooling has also the responsibility to develop student understanding of being part of a group, to belong to the group, to take pride in its achievements, to struggle with its problems and to share in its day to day activities. While many school leaders will probably want to say that is what they are already doing, this movement does represent a first in that schools are now to be increasingly recognised for playing this important role in community development. In terms of social inclusion, schooling is about more than individual achievement, it requires a whole class and then a whole school approach, which leads logically into participating in the wider community.

An emphasis on education

The Rann government's Social Inclusion Initiative was committed to producing measurable outcomes.   This orientation led to a major focus on school retention rates which, after fluctuating fairly wildly since 1990, were recognised as being particularly poor in low SES schools and consistently strong in high SES schools. Retention rates are a different matter in the non-government schools where many sites report increased retention in the senior school years. Retention does not function as a simple indicator of social class, however as there are specific context effects. For example in the suburbs to the north of Adelaide where the social indicators demonstrate the area to be one of the most disadvantaged in the country (Thomson, 2002) one large and rapidly growing non-government school has consistently high retention. A possible explanation for this is that the school's presence allows for a selection out within the generally depressed area of those families who can and choose to afford some school fees thereby further residualising the non fee paying government schools in the area. Thus it cannot be inferred that poor retention is in itself an indicator of a failure of inclusion on the part of the government schools in the area, but rather can be seen as a consequence of contextual features particular to that school.

At a more general level the implications of the policy for the everyday practice of schooling are not particularly clear. In what ways have SA schools changed as a result of the government's adoption of the Social Inclusion Policy? How do school leaders implement the policy at their site? What are the main barriers to Social inclusion in primary schools? With these questions in mind the South Australian Primary Principals' Association (SAPPA) commissioned an inquiry into the ways in which the policy was being understood and implemented throughout the state primary schools.

In order to facilitate the largest possible number of responses, the investigation took the form of an electronic survey followed by focus group interviews. The survey was designed to gather information about particular schools, baseline data such as size, needs classification, staff numbers, language background of students etc and then it proceeded to ask about how school leaders viewed issues to do with Social Inclusion. At this stage no definition of social inclusion was provided in the survey – rather the researchers sought to discover just how the term was being understood and taken up by school leaders. In particular respondents were asked about what they saw as significant barriers to social inclusion as well as what strategies they considered were working well in this direction. In each case they were asked to answer in general terms and then in terms of their particular school. The study was conducted in terms of one response per school. Where several of the school staff were members of the SAPPA they were invited to get together to discuss their school in terms of the issues raised. Thus the survey attempted to promote discussion and debate at each school site around issues of social inclusion.

Following the survey thirty six school leaders participated in focus group discussions in which elements from the survey were discussed. Four of the groups were based in the city with the remaining two taking place in regional centres. The discussions were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Results and discussion

The survey drew 280 responses, around 70% of the total number of schools containing SAPPA members. The 280 schools represented all levels of disadvantage,

a mix of long established schools and newer ones, as well as rural and urban locations in numbers commensurate with the total distribution.

It was immediately evident that the term social inclusion provoked different responses in different schools: the school leaders offered a range of meanings associated with social inclusion ranging from seeing it as yet another basis for claiming the need for more resources and/or airing particular grievances to a fully developed understanding of inclusivity and a readiness to engage in work leading to the promotion and maintenance of social inclusion. Comments included

> *There is a lack of common understanding about what social inclusion*
> *means and of commitment to strategies to support this.*

> *People are still developing their understanding of what social inclusion*
> *means – I suspect it means many different things to different people both*
> *within and beyond DECS.*

At the same time many of the respondents were ready to recognise the importance of the initiative, as in

> *We are pleased that Social inclusion has been placed as a DECS*
> *priority as it must be in all of our schools if we are to cater for all*
> *students.*

And

> *There must always be an explicit focus on social inclusion or whatever*
> *it is labelled in the future.*

Perceived barriers to social inclusion

The respondents identified barriers to social inclusion in their particular school communities and they volunteered a range of features they saw as central barriers connected with the school system. In order of priority these included:

> **Large class size**
> **Restrictions on staff selection**
> **Lack of special education support**
> **Lack of educational resources in the school**
> **Lack of educational facilities within the school**

The question of class size and the capacity of principals to select appropriate staff became two key recommendations in the report of the study, given the broad recognition of these issues as key barriers in the move of schools to become more socially inclusive communities.

The respondents also were aware of particular problems associated with students that worked against the development of an inclusive school community. These they saw as follows:

Mental health – emotional/psychological problems
Family instability
Lack of social skills
Behavioural difficulties
Low socio-economic status

This list presents as more intractable than the school systemic barriers noted above, as so many of these features relate to issues of poverty and poor educational background. The nomination of mental health as the chief barrier to social inclusion was at first surprising. Focus group discussions later explained that mental health issues currently function as an umbrella category for describing an array of student problems such as ADHD, intellectual disability, depression, drug related psychoses and so on. It remains of real concern that such issues are prevalent in primary schools.

Strategies that were working to promote social inclusion

The respondents were asked to nominate up to five strategies that were actually in place in the primary school system to redress social exclusion. They were also asked to indicate whether the nominated strategy was

- working very effectively to redress social exclusion

- working moderately effectively

- not working effectively

The following charts show their nomination of strategies in the order of priority:

Very effective strategies

School counsellors
Early intervention programs
Student involvement in school decision making
Professional development of staff
DECS support personnel

Moderately effective strategies

Student involvement in school decision making
Early intervention programs
Professional development of staff
DECS support personnel
Parent/grandparent involvement in school

Not effective strategies

Access to interagency support such as FAYS, CAMS etc
ISBMs (Interagency Student Behaviour Management)

DECS support personnel
Student involvement in school decision making
Learning Centres

Taking the very effective and moderately effective choices together, 'early intervention programs' and 'school counsellors' are clearly seen by the senior educators as effective ways to promote social inclusion. The appearance of DECS support personnel in all three categories indicated that such strategies depend on the quality of the personnel involved and the appropriateness of their intervention to the particular case. In itself this feature was not taken to indicate either the uselessness or the effectiveness of department intervention in schools.

In the subsequent Focus Groups it was remarked that school counselling is owned by the school. The school is not dependent on the cooperation of an outside agency in this instance. The Focus Groups made mention of the fact that the principal had become a de facto counsellor, often without the due training, and that the advent of counsellors had filled a cavity. The negative side of this was also expressed – that counsellors were the first port of call for all the administration's problems and that this was the real reason for the high level of 'effectiveness'. Likewise, it could be said that the early intervention programs are owned by the individual school and can be used to advantage in the local situation.

The related question required the respondents to speak in general about primary schools in South Australia and to nominate up to five strategies that should be put in place to further social inclusion. In fact, this was a wish list. The strategies are listed here in order of priority:

School counsellors
Reduction of class size
Professional development of staff
Access to interagency support such as FAYS, CAMS etc
Provision of community agencies

The strategy which was overwhelmingly selected as the most useful was school counsellors. The next most frequently listed, reduction of class size, had been the topic of much debate as the SA Department had limited class size in the early school years and many teachers felt that this was not enough and also that it tended to make further difficulties higher up the school when children had to adjust to being in a class of thirty or over after being in a class of around half that number.

There was an emphasis in the responses on the widespread goodwill among the staff working in South Australian primary schools. In general, it was stated, the staff are dedicated to social inclusion. However, their efforts are hampered in two directions: policy and resources. The principal policy that needed to be implemented, a majority of responses emphasised, was the reduction of class size. Resources called for included straight financial support for initiatives that would facilitate social inclusion as well as financial backing for the employment of more teachers, counsellors, social workers and so on.

Final comments largely concerned the fact that social inclusion and social exclusion are whole of community preoccupations. They have their roots long before schooling begins and continue well beyond schooling. Some examples:

The work on inclusion needs to be undertaken with the whole community.

We need a whole of community approach. It's not just about what schools can do.

It takes a village to raise a child.

There were calls for one or other strategy to be implemented; there were impassioned pleas for something to be done quickly; there were commendations for SAPPA for having taken on this survey of senior educators' perceptions.

Recommendations

Following the study the report listed nine recommendations for strategies that would further the task of developing social inclusion in SA schools.

Recommendation 1: That DECS explore the situation of outer metropolitan primary schools as regards their level of disadvantage in terms of access to educational experiences for their students.

Recommendation 2: That the issue of large class size be addressed as a matter of priority by the maintenance of the JP-160 initiative and its extension to the entire primary school sector.

Recommendation 3: That restrictions on staff selection by primary principals be removed and principals be authorised to select and retain staff on the basis of their performance and their cultural suitability.

Recommendation 4: That the funding formula for School Service Officers (SSOs) and Special Education needs be recognised as inadequate and undergo review.

Recommendation 5: That alternative strategies be developed for those children whose extremes of behaviour render them uncontrollable in the normal school environment.

> *Recommendation 6: That additional funding be provided for the extension of the school counsellor initiative to all primary schools and for appropriate training to be implemented for all counsellors.*
>
> *Recommendation 7: That DECS coordinate interagency support to ensure that the issue of mental health is appropriately addressed in the primary school sector.*
>
> *Recommendation 8: That measures be taken to ensure better links between DECS support personnel and the local primary school sector so that adequate and effective assistance is available when and as required.*
>
> *Recommendation 9: That the professional development for staff relating to Social Inclusion strategies become an immediate priority.*

The list of recommendations reflects the comments supplied by school leaders in terms of strategies to enhance the development of more inclusive school environments. Many of these recommendations concern resourcing, but they are directed at more systemic solutions than were the previous efforts to reduce social inequality. Thus class sizes are to be reduced in *all* schools, *all* teaches should have access to professional development in the area of social inclusion, counsellors should be made available in *all* schools and *all* principals should have more say in the recruitment and retention of staff. Already there are some pleasing indications that the recommendations are being treated seriously by the Department. Earlier this year the Department has taken up the recommendation about principals having the power of staff selection and this significant change in staff allocation is to take place from next year. The move to produce more school counsellors has been steadily growing in recent times as well.

Aftermath
While the report was well received by large numbers of the school community, one feature of its public launch is noteworthy.

The Rann government has in recent years adopted the practice of appointing certain individuals to prominent government positions, not simply as advisors but having a good deal of power in relation to particular policy briefs. Not surprisingly perhaps the person appointed to head the Social Inclusion Initiative is a prominent minister of religion who had developed a national reputation in a range of work in Human Services. At the public launch of the report he spoke to the gathering of some 170 school principals, Department heads and the researchers. Overall he told the assembly that he was not impressed by calls for more research as in his view research was mainly left in vast tomes on dusty shelves and rarely consulted by people responsible for getting a job done. This statement served to reflect a particular personal philosophy that those of us who are researchers frequently encounter. He

had more to say however. In particular he expressed some disappointment with the recommendation that there be better liaison systems between schools and service agencies so that the lines of communication could be made more straightforward. Many respondents had indicated experiencing difficulty with the maze of interagency possibilities and overlapping jurisdictions. The particular recommendation had proceeded from the revelation at one regional centre where there was just such a liaison set up which was available to all schools in the area and thereby saved each school from having to go through the rounds of applying to particular agencies to attend different child-centred problems. This, our Head of Social Inclusion told us, was a case of the schools looking for outside help when what they should be doing is attending to the issues themselves.

Unfortunately for us all this very busy person had to leave the meeting after giving his speech – consequently he was saved from the level of outrage his remarks had provoked. School principals described the impossibility of getting interagency support for the intractable problems that confront them on a daily basis in some cases. The issue is important in that it reveals another reading of the social inclusion initiative, one in which the government can take the position that each institution should strive for increased self sufficiency and not look to government for assistance.

Social Inclusion in this guise may be not too different from social capital – a theory that governments are keen to take up as it would seem to relieve them of any burden of responsibility in troubled times. In this approach it seems that the divisions between schools in comfortable neighbourhoods and those in poorer areas would likely become ever more pronounced and the ideal of inclusivity would be unlikely to be realised.

A much stronger version of social inclusion was offered by the school leaders who appeared to respond very positively to the idea that their job was more than to educate for the fulfilment of individual potential, a phrase which has been a keystone of educational philosophy in recent times. These school leaders saw in social inclusion the recognition of the task to which schools have long been committed, namely to participate and grow as a community in which all are respected, in which differences are acknowledged and the idea of working together for a common good is central to the educational experience.

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