Towards equity? social inequality, education and post-school plans: some policy implications

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Combating poverty in the sense of capability deprivation involves expanding autonomy, agency and the freedom to choose and this requires that the poor have access to the resources needed to choose wisely and to benefit from the choices they make (Saunders 2005 p. 98)

Students in our struggling schools are no less intelligent than other students but they will often not know what’s required (Boyle 2005)

Restoring credibility to Australian poverty research involves demonstrating that those who are classified as poor are experiencing deprivation and/or exclusion (are ‘missing out’ in John Howard’s words) and do not just report low income in social survey. We need to validate the evidence of low income with other indicators that show that those who rely on that income…are not able to achieve basic community standards of consumption, participation, decency and freedom from shame (Saunders 2005 p.133)
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Introduction: equity through education?

This paper considers some policy implications stemming from recently conducted research about families’ influences on the post-school plans of students (Beavis et al 2004). The research aimed to consider enabling circumstances for secondary school students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds regarding educational participation and achievement.

The first section of the paper describes the research and the findings. Responding to these findings the second section considers equity issues and suggests some policy responses.

Section one: the research

Context

The Smith Family is interested in children and education. In Australia socioeconomic status has an above average impact on student performance and thus hampers equitable educational achievement (OECD & UNESCO-USI 2003). Recognising the need to uncouple linkages between disadvantage and limited educational achievement, The Smith Family has a particular interest in researching and further understanding circumstances enabling educational achievement.

To this end in 2004 The Smith Family released a report entitled Post-School Plans: aspirations, expectations and implementation (Beavis et al 2004). The major stimulus for the Post-School Plans project was a report released by The Smith Family a year earlier in 2003. That report, Barriers to Participation (Zappala (Ed.) 2003) highlighted barriers to educational participation and achievement experienced by students from financially disadvantaged families. In Post-School Plans the focus shifted to considering enabling circumstances. That is the Post-School Plans report sought to identify factors that assisted students to further and more fully engage in education and learning. Both reports are in keeping with The Smith Family’s interest in helping disadvantaged Australian children and their families create a better future through education (The Smith Family 2003).

The paper today, Towards equity? aims to highlight some material and conclusions from the Post-School Plans Report and specifically relate this to policy options. Although the report was launched in March 2004 the equity implications arising are deserving of the dedicated forum that is the Australian Social Policy Conference. The full Post-school Plans report can be downloaded from The Smith Family website; see: http://www.smithfamily.com.au/documents/tsf_postschoolplans_2004_29DBF.pdf.

Defining Post-School Plans

In the study post-school plans were understood as the set of aspirations and expectations that an individual holds about activities relating to:

- a) education; post-compulsory school destinations; these included TAFE, VET, university, and other learning/training options.
- b) work
- c) family

they will undertake after leaving secondary school.
Why Post-School Plans?

The significance of post-school plans was highlighted in the 2003 Barriers to Participation Report. In that report Watson and Considine noted that

‘the post-school plans of students provide an indication of the level of success in school and their subsequent attitudes towards school and learning’ (Watson & Considine 2003, p.56).

Furthermore, there are significant linkages both in Australia and elsewhere between education and employment. For many individuals, higher levels of educational achievement are inversely correlated with unemployment, underemployment and duration of unemployment. The more highly educated an individual is, the less likely they are to experience unemployment or underemployment. If they do experience unemployment the period of unemployment is likely to be of shorter duration than the average period of unemployment. Additionally the higher an individual’s level of educational achievement the higher the probability of better remuneration is for that individual. Having post-school qualifications is an indicator of lower risk that an individual will experience poverty in later life. The Post-School Plans report was also concerned therefore with the likelihood and extent to which students’ post-school plans to study, or to work, were implemented, and with influences having a bearing on this implementation.

There is at least one caution concerning the relationships between educational and employment outcomes previously mentioned. Dockery’s (2005) work on the value of additional years of schooling for the non-academically inclined signposts this need for caution. He correctly notes the strength of belief in Australia that high school completion delivers better labour market outcomes as opposed to those experienced by early school leavers. This belief is, by and large, supported by available evidence (OECD 2005; Rothman 2003). However, as Dockery highlights, young people are not an homogenous group. As such unassailable and unquestioned benefits of extended schooling and education for all should not be incorrectly assumed in an a priori fashion. Dockery’s recent study suggested that extended schooling does not necessarily benefit the non-academically inclined individual with regard to wage differentials. Nevertheless in a society more concerned with equitable education than our current one, arrangements might support and deliver a different spread of educational and labour market outcomes. These outcomes would differ in that they would be uncoupled from the socio economic status of students.

Looking at Post-School Plans: Research Questions

Two major research questions addressed in the report were:

1. What are the post-school plans of young people?
2. What factors are associated with the development of these post-school plans?

Data Sources

In addition to a literature review, the study utilised data from two main sources. These were the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA 2000) data for Australia. In the analysis undertaken using the LSAY material the study considered the data relating to post-school plans provided by Year 9 students, who were then in 1995. The study also looked at their responses in 1999 when they had mostly completed secondary schooling.

Findings

This section of the paper highlights some of the Report’s findings concerning families. Two pertinent variables were the socio-economic status of the family, and parental educational levels. These were considered separately, although, as noted earlier, there are significant intersections between educational attainment and socioeconomic status.
Post-school plans and their implementation

Family socio-economic status

Family socio-economic status had a weak, but nonetheless notable, effect on the post-school plans of students. Students from higher socio-economic circumstances were more likely to plan to undertake university study.

Family socio-economic status influenced the extent to which young people were able to successfully implement their post-school plans, especially when those plans were for attending a university.

Family socio-economic status does not appear to be associated with difficulty in realising post-school plans as described in Year 9, where these plans do not involve university study.

Or to put it another way, students from low SES backgrounds were less likely to plan to study at a University. Even when they did plan, they were less likely to implement these plans.

Parental educational levels

Students whose parents had a degree or diploma were more likely to plan to study full-time after school completion.

Gender

In 1995 most Year 9 students planned further study in their first year after leaving school. However about 40% of boys and 20% of girls planned no post-school study. About 20% of all students didn’t know what they thought they would do in the first year after they left school. In Australia Year 9 students are usually 14-15 years old.

Scholars have argued that the family is a central site of, and influence on, the formation of gender. Certainly there are, as the above material indicates, significant gender differences relating to formation of post-school plans. However these are noted, rather than explored in this paper. It is well known that gender has a major influence on patterns of educational participation and achievement, on post-school qualifications and in determining an individual’s place, level, opportunity and remuneration in the labour market. Girls are more likely to plan to study at University than boys. There are also currently higher proportions of women enrolled in Australian universities (ABS 2004). While explorations around gender and equity are beyond the scope of this paper, further work is required. The range of short term and longer term outcomes for low socio-economic status, ‘at risk’, early school leavers, and the effects of these outcomes are of particular interest.

Section 2

Equity and policy

The post-school plans of students are one indicator of the extent to which educational arrangements allow and foster equity and opportunity. These plans could be seen as a particular example of Saunders (2005) arguments about poverty and capability deprivation. Have high school students ‘had access to the resources’ they need ‘to choose wisely and to benefit from the choices they make’ (Saunders 2005 p.98). Whether post-school plans are able to be implemented may be viewed as another indicator of equity in educational arrangements.

Post-school plans of students are relevant not just to the individual student but to their families, their communities and their societies. Community and educational development should include considerations of post-school plans and the influences on these, so that individuals, communities and our wider society can all reach their potential.
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University scholarships have been seen as one way to ensure a degree of equity, or to use the Australian government’s term ‘fairness’ (Department of Education, Science and Training 2005), in the system. The findings above, however, suggest that the provision of University scholarships for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds provides only a partial, and possibly parsimonious, means of addressing the challenges of ensuring equity in Australian education. For a significant group of Australian students, university scholarships appear irrelevant; many students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are turning away from the thought of a University education even before they are in senior high school (Carpenter 2004; Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2004).

For those students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are interested in University education there is a significantly lower likelihood of undertaking this option. The LSAY cohort revealed the post-school patterns of students in 1999. In the period since 1999 other analyses have suggested that the relative likelihood of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds attending university had decreased; furthermore this is unlikely to improve following further changes to the operation of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme and ‘FEE-HELP’. (Beer & Chapman 2004; The Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee 2005; Watson, Kearns, Grant & Cameron 2000; Wright 2005).

These findings can be seen as but one, of many, indications that education in Australia increasingly serves to reinforce inequity and maintain socio-economic status. It is difficult to see how the current construct and operation of the educational arrangements in Australia are effectively addressing inequity, or to use Mark Latham’s phrase, offering a ‘ladder of opportunity’. Rather the different phases of education can be viewed as an effective series of ever narrowing sluice gates. These ‘gates’ effectively function to allow better access to quality education to those from higher socio-economic backgrounds. They serve to restrict the access and opportunity offered to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Considine (2004) has argued that current schooling arrangements are ‘worse than nothing for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds’, rather they make ‘their situation worse’ (Considine 2004).

Future directions, further research

Sociologists of education and scholars from other disciplines have considered the ‘social relations of learning’ (Panofsky n.d.). They question the extent to which working class children and youth are able to exercise choice, emphasising rather, the importance of social relations and class culture on their destinations, including their post-school destinations.

Bearing this in mind, we need to know more about how children and youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds relate to the world of work. Do they view this world and their possible roles therein, in different ways from their higher socio-economic counterparts? Major reports commissioned by The Smith Family to be published this year aim to shed further light on the perceptions of disadvantaged secondary school students of the world of work, and of their relationships to this world (Beavis, Curtis 2005a; 2005b).

In Australian society, family background and socio-economic background continue to influence students’ post-school plans, and their implementation of these plans. It is not possible to change students’ family backgrounds. Nor is this desirable. However the findings noted above lead to the following observations:

To achieve equity and offer opportunity our society needs to formulate effective policy, and bring stronger commitment, to uncouple the correlations between:

a) socio-economic status and propensity to make post-school plans

b) socio-economic status and realisation of plans to study at university

c) socio-economic status and the choice of course at university
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Revised and extended equity scholarships and support programs might, to some extent at least, assist some students from lower socio-economic backgrounds to realise their plans for university study. However, if students from low socio-economic backgrounds do not plan to undertake university study then equity scholarships and other support mechanisms at the post-school stage become less relevant.

We need to consider if these students, while at high school, are in effect closing off university options without informed understanding of the possibilities. Alternatively, do these students have a useful cost-benefit knowledge regarding university study? If so, are they using it to decide that university is not for them? Similarly we need to understand further why students from lower socio economic backgrounds are less likely to undertake more prestigious areas of university study and why they are less likely to read for higher degrees (Watson et al 2005). Is the under-representation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds at university level a transmission of inequity that commences at birth or in early childhood, exacerbating as students pass through the school system?

Relatively recent federal initiatives including the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy and the development of the National Agenda for Early Childhood, acknowledge the importance of the early childhood phase in educational and social development (Department of Family and Community Services 2005a; Department of Family and Community Services 2005b). The early childhood period is of crucial importance for successful transitions to school and this recognition is certainly pleasing. However there are several phases and transitions throughout our educational experiences. Equity support is not something to be doled out as individuals arrive at a particular set of educational starting gates, such as those at Melbourne University. For many students this support will be too late. Rather equity in education is an issue for continuous attention from the cradle.

Conclusion

There are sound equitable, civic and social reasons to argue for the need for positive change in educational arrangements and outcomes if our society wishes to strive towards equity in education and educational outcomes. However the effectiveness of such reasons in the current climate is questionable, if not doubtful. There are, however, other salient concerns about ‘human resource development issues’ and how current educational arrangements are placed to deliver optimally in this area. In a period of ongoing information and communication technological revolution, and of globalisation, Australia’s vision of a ‘clever’ country should for effectiveness sake, if nothing else include improved opportunities for realising the potential of all, whatever their socio-economic circumstance or the education of their parents. One tool for achieving this vision would be to far more comprehensively understand why Australian students from different socio-economic backgrounds make the plans they do, or why they don’t make plans, how accurate and useful these plans are, and how students arrive on particular pathways and landing points in their post-school transitions.
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The research regarding students’ post-school plans and the realisation, or non-realisation of these plans is largely drawn from Beavis et al, thus his authorship status. Adrian Beavis is Principal Research Fellow at the Australian Council of Education. Maree Murray is Research Manager at The Smith Family and key author of the material on policy and equity. All content is the opinion of the authors and not necessarily of their organizations.

This was prepared for The Smith Family by Adrian Beavis and co-authors Martin Murphy, Jennifer Bryce and Matthew Corrigan at the Australian Council for Educational Research.


There is a wide ranging literature including domestic, and international, foci on relationships between socioeconomic status and educational achievement. The Introduction in Rothman’s paper provides a useful summary and outline of the main arguments, providing an entry point for further reading. Separate analyses released only last week show higher rates of university eligibility for students from independent schools as compared with students from public schools; see Doherty (2005), and Rindfleisch (2005). Ryan and Watson have convincingly argued and showed the relatively higher socioeconomic background of students at independent schools (Ryan and Watson 2005).

The report also looked at issues relating to ‘pre-dispositions to lifelong learning’ but these have been set aside due to the focus and size of this paper.

Original sample size: 13,613 Year 9 students; follow up sample 8,783 students. There was some weighting so that small groups with especial policy salience, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were oversampled to ensure sufficient respondents for detailed study of these subgroups. Therefore unweighting had to take place so as not to bias population estimates. Further detail of the methodology employed in the analyses can be found in the Post-School Plans report.