Taking the standpoint of the least advantaged
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The 'common sense' understanding of schooling is that the quality of the teacher is the critical contributor to a young person's success. National teaching standards assert that teachers should be able to include the diverse range of students in their classes in productive learning. If we agree that teachers are 'knowledge workers' and not social workers, and their primary responsibility is the official curriculum, worthwhile questions to ask are:

How do teachers express care for young people on or outside the margins of the official curriculum, and;
What do we mean by care in education?

Because it is the most enduring and seemingly intractable condition of education, the discussion here will attempt to answer those questions within the context of the effect of wealth and poverty on schooling participation and success.

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The myth of equality

Take a moment to consider the large scale system wide outcomes of schooling. The evidence contained in between school comparisons on, say, the My School website is compelling.

Schooling outcomes are socially divided on the basis of wealth and poverty. Just as much, those outcomes produce socially divided educational possibilities. The documented effects of schooling challenge any assertion that Australian society is one characterised by equality and fairness.

An entirely similar picture is available at the Victorian Government website which lists the 2016 winners of the Premier's VCE Awards (http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/awards/Pages/vceawardswinners.aspx).

The Awards convincingly demonstrate that the students with the highest ATARs and those with the highest individual study scores have been enrolled in schools with selective entry procedures. Most of the schools listed in the Awards are non-Government schools for which families must contribute fees; in many cases very high fees. In the Government sector, the schools prominent in the Awards are those where admission is secured through academic performance, as determined in entry tests. Schools, which we would regard as local and open to all, don't feature in the VCE awards very much.

What is also noteworthy in the VCE awards is the distribution of awards in the various areas of the school curriculum. Students from high-fee private schools or selective entry Government schools receive the Premier's awards in elite knowledge fields such as Physics, Chemistry and advanced Mathematics. Success in these curriculum areas leads to entry to the higher status courses at University. The diagram below summarises the findings of Professor Richard Teese and colleagues, who, for many years, have used official Education statistics to demonstrate the socially divided and socially dividing effects of schooling.

	High ATAR
	• **High ATAR** • **Higher VCE Scores** • **Elite Knowledge Fields** • **Abstract or symbolic learning** • **Selective entry schools** • **Students from high income families**
Lower Family Income	*Higher Family Income*
• **Low ATAR** • **Lower VCE scores** • **Non-elite Knowledge Fields** • **Hands on or practice-based learning** • **Open entry schools** • **Students from low income families**	*Low ATAR*

Source: Compiled from charts in Teese and Polesel 2003, pgs 42 & 120.

A worrying 'truth'

One difficult conclusion for us as teachers is that we participate in and contribute to the social division which is education's predominant, and most discomforting, outcome. In Australia, nearly 50 years of social democratic reform policies and funding have transformed schooling; notably the percentage of young people who complete secondary schooling and take on tertiary education. Its impressive achievements notwithstanding, the fundamental condition of Australian education is that educational success and its rewards are aligned with family wealth and educational background.

The wealth and schooling outcome linkage is not some predetermined reproduction of social class. But a manifest and enduring probability is that the children of wealthy families will have educational experiences leading to success within the rigours of the official curriculum; and the resultant access to the highest status tertiary courses and the most prestigious of the professions. Conversely, young people from the least

advantaged families are likely to struggle within the official curriculum and to achieve educational results which preclude their access to elite courses and professions.

What is to be done?

Consider the acknowledged advances in schooling. Two generations ago, schools were places where wheel-chair mobile students weren't able to gain access to classrooms. In recent times, school authorities have constructed new buildings and 'retro-fitted' older classrooms with ramps, opening-up physical access. These changes were not initiated through benevolent decision-making by a far-seeing bureaucracy. They were the result of protracted and informed grass-roots and national political activism.

The dedication which impels such change has emerged from more than two centuries of purposeful thinking about the socially divided conditions of nations. Termed by some 'the golden rule', and by followers of the 18th century philosopher, Immanuel Kant, 'the categorical imperative', the commitment to act against social inequality and to struggle for a just society requires the taking of the standpoint of the least advantaged.

Taking the standpoint of the least advantaged is beyond any altruistic expressing of 'sympathy' for or 'empathy' with people living in poverty. It is to take on the material challenge of making socially just education. Similar to activists who challenge physical access to schools, a teacher taking the standpoint of those living in poverty will commence with a recognition of those who are the least advantaged students and their life circumstances. Recognition of 'the other' is fundamental in our Western conceptions of social justice; and to the expressions of care embodied in socially just practice.

Recognition is not enough, however, to express an approach to education that expresses care for students. Spreading the benefits of education so that those least advantaged by schooling have enhanced access to the most sophisticated knowledge is essentially a matter of curriculum and pedagogy. Taking the standpoint of the least advantaged is to ask how students who live in poverty experience the official curriculum and the procedures school systems, schools and teachers use to transmit the knowledge our society regards as important. The following 'standpoint' questions can ground inquiry into the material circumstances faced by young people on the margins of the official curriculum:

- *Can we see our classrooms, our schools and our school systems as the least advantaged students see and experience them?*
- *What are the practices and structures that might deter or exclude some children and young people from full participation in education?*
- *What are the practices and structures within classrooms and schools which can best support and encourage the participation and successful engagement of the least advantaged students in learning?*

The teacher as political agent

Many teachers will regard politics as not a condition of their work. But the decisions made on what might appear to be unexceptional, possibly neutral, matters such as timetabling, class groupings and department budgets are intensely political. These local, 'micropolitical' issues connect directly with the national politics which frames educational debate and strategic thinking. Teachers who seek to care about the least advantaged in their classrooms will be political agents: if not on the broad national level; then at least by leading discussions, with colleagues, initiated by inquiry into the three 'standpoint' questions. Agreements among colleagues can provide micropolitical leverage for teams of teachers to open up negotiations with school leadership about 'the practices and structures' which support or get in the way of the successful participation by the least advantaged students in learning.

Getting started on the recognition of the least advantaged and their circumstances

Being informed about what it is like to exist on low income – to live in relative poverty – is the first step in coming to an understanding of the material circumstances of the least advantaged. Here are some simple tasks which can provide insights into how living in or close to poverty affects educational participation.

1. Invite a representative of a social welfare organisation active in the local community to discuss in school their experiences of working with disadvantaged families. Cases of practice in supporting families could be complemented by the presentation of up-to-date socioeconomic data about the structural conditions of social division.
2. Undertake examinations of information about the nature of socially divided education. A good way to start is to compare the fees paid by families who enrol their young people in the richest private schools with the income of families dependent on social welfare. Useful website are:

For information about private schools and their fees: http://privateschoolsguide.com/

Information about social welfare payments can be obtained from Australian Government websites. The disability support pension for example is $1,317.40 per fortnight (as at June 2016); i.e. $34,252.40 per annum. To confirm go to:https://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/disability-support-pension

A clear, if unwitting, account of the socially divided nature of schooling is available at the Better Schools website. For instance it provides a top-bottom listing of schools based on their VCE results: http://bettereducation.com.au/Results/vce.aspx

Further Reading

Connell, RW 1993, *Schools and social justice*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia [Pa.].

Gewirtz, Sharon. 2006. 'Conceptualising social justice in education: mapping the territory'*. Journal of Education Policy* 13:4, 469-484.

Teese, R. and Polesel, J. 2003. *Undemocratic Schooling: Equity and Quality in Mass Secondary* Education in Australia. Carlton, Vic. Melbourne University Press.