Chapter 20
Imagining Social Equity

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ABSTRACT

In my view, work in special and inclusive education, and early childhood special education intervention is challenging and exciting. The children and young people (and adults) with complex special needs have become the shared responsibility of both educators and many other allied health professionals in recent years. The unique patterns of special education service delivery to these children and young people require work in interdisciplinary teams. The mission and concern of the chapter offers the interdisciplinary community in the education sector including teachers, academics, graduate students, policy makers, researchers, non-governmental organisations, government officials, school boards, medical and paramedical professionals, and advocacy groups the opportunity to work together to explore what notions of social equity mean, and to investigate ways of ameliorating disadvantage in special and inclusive education, and early childhood special education intervention sectors.

INTRODUCTION

Exclusion from a range of educational contexts can take many forms. The chapter focuses on the profound issues and challenges pertinent to the education of children and young people living with long term recurring chronic disease, e.g., asthma, cancer, diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease that are not curable, but can be managed.

"Kids being held back as ill health overlooked" was a perhaps an emotive header for an article published in *The Weekend Australian*, November 2014 (Ferrari, 2014). The article highlighted the current circumstance of the education of these children and young people. The article referred to a study of 720 such children and young people in the States of Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia (Goldfeld, et al, 2015). The study provides a fascinating aperture for an examination of an interdisciplinary dialogue on issues and challenges.

The chapter constructs a line of reasoning that links contemporary notions of *social equity* towards the creation of interdisciplinary approaches that mitigate disadvantage in the education of these children and young people. The more contemporary notion of social equity refers to social and cultural, rather

than political, economic and environmental equity. For example, the notion encompasses "... policy, professional practice and research models beyond treating people equally, e.g., irrespective of sex, gender, race, age, sexual orientation, origin, caste or class, income or property, language, religion, convictions, opinions, health or disability …" (Melbourne Social Equity Institute (MSEI), 2014).

By definition, the contexts of public policy frameworks, particularly social policy frameworks, e.g., frameworks in the special and inclusive education, and early childhood special education intervention sectors are fraught with significant and complex, indeed controversial challenges and opportunities. The chapter explores the multitude of legal instruments, implementation bodies, special procedures, human rights NGOs and transitional justice mechanisms that guide public policy and professional practice. Public policy frameworks have gradually become embedded into Australian evidence-based policy and professional practice, and research models that ensure inclusion of these children and young people in education.

From the perspective of the humanities and social sciences, the chapter advocates for embedding of sustainable social, cultural, economic, political and environmental benefit into evidence based policy, professional practice and research into special and inclusive education and early childhood special education intervention sectors that honours diversity, difference and identity to these children and young people, and their families in a changing world.

IMAGINING SOCIAL EQUITY

More contemporary notions of social equity have a history informed by the body of literature of internationally distinguished and highly respected social critics over at least the past fifty years, e.g., Runciman (1967); Derrida, 1978; Foucault, 1983; Foucault, 1991a; Foucault, 1991b; Foucault, 1991c; The United States President's Council on Sustainable Development (1996); and Gylfason and Zoega (2003).

These social critics have expressed views that, for example, "... the many inequalities between one person or group and another... are social [and/or cultural]... as opposed to economic or political...". Critics advocate for explicit embedding of significant, innovative and sustainable social, cultural, economic, political and environmental benefit into best evidence based policy, professional practice and research. Other critics advocate for a "... [re] balance of social, cultural, economic, political and environmental equity...".

Education has long been regarded as one of the key determinants of economic growth around the world. Nevertheless, a widely held view among economists is that economic efficiency and political expediency are incompatible with social and cultural equity, if not outright mutually exclusive. The revival of economic growth theory in recent years appears to have brought dynamic efficiency and expediency to the fore. However, it is deemed beyond the mission and concern of the chapter to provide a critique of this body of literature.

Embedded in the body of literature of social criticism, more contemporary notions of *social equity* refer to social and cultural, rather than political, economic and environmental equity. Notions encompass policy, professional practice and research models beyond treating people equally irrespective of sex, gender, race, age, sexual orientation, origin, caste or class, income or property, language, religion, convictions, opinions, health or disability.

It is challenging to define contemporary notions of social equity. However, it provides a most important aperture that informs key stake holders in the interdisciplinary community of educators about what may be

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