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Rural school principals' perceptions of social justice in neo-liberal times: Towards a pluralistic notion of rural education

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Abstract

In this paper I apply the theory of social justice to evidence drawn from interviews with two rural school principals in Victoria. I examine the perceptions of social justice held by two rural school principals to analyse the pressing issues that rural schools and their principals face in their quest to provide a socially just education. The importance of seeking principals' responses is based on their crucial position in leading their school culture and in responding to policies that define the educational landscape. In the last two decades, educational policies have been shaped by the dominant vision of restructuring the Australian economy to compete in a tougher international market, therefore, replacing the former dominant vision of social justice and equal opportunity with one based on managerialism, productivity and competition. Neo-liberal managerialist discourses and practices of perfomativity, testing and accountability now play a central function in determining principals' role in schools. These discourses and practices have the potential to affect how principals conceptualise social justice and, in turn, how they apply it to practices in favour of a more socially just schooling. In this paper I argue that rural schools still face relevant issues of unjust distribution of resources, participation in policy-making and cultural recognition. I argue that rural education needs to engage with a pluralistic view of what social justice is; one that includes three dimensions: distributive, associational and recognitial justice.

Introduction

This paper applies the theory of social justice to rural education**.** I examine the perceptions of social justice held by two rural school principals in Victoria to analyse the pressing issues that rural schools and their principals face in their quest to provide a socially just education. By relating social justice to rural education, their discourses and practices, principals draw boundaries of social (in)justice. The boundaries that I am interested in this paper concern the distribution of resources, participation in policy-making and recognition of different social groups and individuals. In drawing these boundaries, I argue that principals have the capacity to redress but also to reinforce inequalities.

The importance of seeking principals' perceptions of social justice is based on their crucial position in responding to neo-liberal policies that define the educational landscape. They are at the front-line of implementing these policies which affect the social organization of the school and the education

offered to their students. School principals play a critical role in promoting an inclusive school culture and delivering high quality education.

Social justice is critical for education because schools have the capacity to promote social transformation as well as to reproduce social inequalities. Federal and State government policies and documents claim that every child in Australia should be entitled to benefit from the same high quality school education. From the Adelaide Declaration in 1999 to the Federalist Paper 2 in 2007, they affirm that schooling should be free from differences arising from student's socioeconomic background or geographic location, and that Federal and State policies should be socially just (Council for the Australian Federation, 2007; Department of Education & Training, 2005; Department of Education & Training, 2003; MCEETYA, 2001; MCEETYA, 1999). These policies and documents affirm that all young people should enjoy the opportunity to learn and develop their full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the nation. The commitment to social justice is clear and sound: the policies and documents advocate for the distribution of adequate facilities and resources for all schools, the participation and involvement of the educational and broader community in matters of schooling, and the respect and celebration of diversity for all students.

Despite the good intentions of these policies and documents, educational inequalities still exist with regard to gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, socioeconomic and geographical background in Australian schools. In 2007 a report by the State and Territories education departments established that the Australian school system is 'less equitable than the systems of some other similar high-performing countries' in the OECD (Council for the Australian Federation, 2007: 6). In Victoria, findings also suggest that government schools in rural regions are still lagging behind metropolitan ones. Statistics regarding the apparent retention rate for government schools from Year 7-12 show 84.4 per cent in Metropolitan regions while in non-Metropolitan regions it is significantly lower, at 68.5 per cent, a gap of 15 per cent. More than 30 per cent of students that started Year 7 do not complete Year 12 in non-Metropolitan regions (Department of Education & Training, 2007). Finally, a comparison of apparent retention rates of government schools against non-government in Victoria shows 78.8 per cent for the former while the latter registers a 93.0 per cent (Department of Education & Training, 2007). Thus, it can be seen that social justice issues remain critical for schooling and for rural schools in particular.

In the next section I will present the background of the two schools of this study. I continue by outlining three different dimensions that inform the concept of social justice: distributive, associational and recognitional justice. This will serve as a theoretical framework for analysis of the evidence drawn

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from the interviews. I move on to examine the relationship between neo-liberal policies and rural schooling, looking at the role of the principal. Finally, I analyse where the principals draw the boundaries of social justice, in order to examine how these concepts may promote a more socially just school.

Background of this Study

This paper draws on semi-structured interviews with two government school principals in rural Victoria undertaken as part of my doctoral study. The interviews focused on three areas: (1) rurality: the rural context in which these two principals are situated; (2) the normative theory of social justice: what do these principals think social justice means in abstract terms; and (3) issues of rural schooling: the context of social justice for rural schools, through the implementation of policies, the relationship with students and the process and products of education carried on in the school.

To maintain confidentiality, I will call one school Highland School and the other Lowland School. Highland School is located in a rural area in north-western Victoria and its community is predominantly composed of farmers. It is a P-12 school and its principal has been in the school for more than seven years but only for less than a year as principal at the time the interviews took place. The school has a marginal social group formed by students of parents ‘on the dole’. It receives students from the town and surrounding farms but also attracts students from a nearby town. Overall, the school is presented by the principal as a ‘successful’ case, where the level of satisfaction of teachers, students and parents is high.[1]

Lowland School, by comparison, is located in a rural area in south-east Victoria and its community is drawn from different economic activities, such as farming, a decaying timber industry and incipient tourism. It is a secondary college and its principal has been in the school and the job for less than two years at the time the interviews took place. Half of the school’s student population receives welfare assistance[2] and around five per cent of its population is Koori. Lowland School competes with other schools from nearby towns and has been losing students to them. The principal portrays Lowland School as a struggling school facing unfair competition from other schools.

Dimensions of Social Justice

One of the difficulties in conceptualising social justice is that it is a contested term that does not have the same meaning for everyone (Griffiths, 2003). Social justice (or injustice) is usually understood in terms of merit, need, fairness, equality and equity, among other principles, and it is used by political theorists, sociologists and educational researchers as self-evident and self-explanatory. The idea of

social justice however, is not self-evident, and as political theorist David Miller (1999: ix) argues it often 'seems little more than a rhetorical phrase used to add lustre to some policy or proposal that the speaker wants us to support'. Following MacIntyre's (1985; 1988) arguments, different political, economic and social actors in society create a pluralistic agenda and each of these groups sustain their ideas and objectives through different rival theories of social justice. These competing concepts of social justice and conflicting positions do not arrive at a definitive concept of what social justice is (MacIntyre, 1985). A rhetoric of consensus – a sense that we all understand what we are referring to when we speak of social justice – masks these very real differences and presumes a universal idea about what social justice means for different groups and in different contexts. What this rhetoric of consensus does is foreclose an ongoing discussion about real differences in the idea and how best to attain socially just outcomes.

Empirical studies that have looked into beliefs about the idea of social justice are commonly based on liberal theories, mostly informed by *distributive justice*; a theory that encapsulates the principles of desert, need and rights.[3] Distributive justice is concerned, among other issues, with income distribution and welfare matters, such as housing, education and health. A conventional approach to social justice along distributive lines sees major social institutions assigning rights and duties and distributing benefits and burdens through social co-operation (Rawls, 1972). An example of distributive justice in rural schooling is the concern for adequate facilities and funding to provide a broad range of courses to rural students.

Young's (1990) critique of distributive theories of social justice claims that they are rooted in a liberal notion of individual freedom, autonomy and equality, thus neglecting important individual and social differences, diversity and different forms of oppression. Addressing inequalities in rural education uniquely through the prism of a redistribution of resources presents an incomplete picture of the needs of rural schools and students. In an increasing societal environment of plurality and fragmentation (Griffiths, 2003) defining social justice according to the normative theory of distribution presents an incomplete reading of the debates concerning schooling.

Social justice, and schooling, encompass more than the distribution of material resources. I base my discussion on Gewirtz's theoretical understanding of social justice, which is more relevant to educational issues. Gewirtz (2006) argues for a multi-dimensional nature of social justice that encompasses distributive justice but also what is known as recognitional and associational justice. *Recognitional justice*, also formulated as the politics of identity, 'refers to the absence of cultural domination, non-recognition and disrespect' experienced by marginal social groups or individuals

(Gewirtz, 2006: 74). An example of recognitional justice in rural schooling is the promotion and celebration of diversity through the inclusion and legitimation of all social groups' culture and identity.

The third dimension, *associational justice*, is defined by the degree of participation by individuals or groups in decisions which affect the conditions in which they live and act (Gewirtz, 2006). It incorporates the dimension of 'voice' (Craig, 2007), of being able to express one's own needs through processes of participative dialogue. Associational justice in schooling makes the *process* of education as relevant as the *products* or outcomes. An example of associational justice in rural schooling is the principals' participation in policy-making processes.

The importance of Gewirtz's (2006: 78) contribution to the relation between social justice and schooling comes not only from the accessible presentation of the multi-dimensional approach to social justice but also from her argument that we need to contextualise social justice.[4] As she informs us, social justice has to be understood in terms of 'the mediated nature of just practices', within the 'competing norms' and 'external constraints' that shape discourses and practices in schools. In other words, what happens in schools cannot be understood through abstract principles; it must be understood in relation to dominant discourses, power relations and normative socioeconomic constraints. It is this need to engage with concrete and practical concerns of rural schooling that I consider critical in recognising socially unjust discourses and practices in schools.

Social Justice as Fairness

I want to illustrate how the two principals I interviewed understand and enact social justice within their schools by applying the three theoretical dimensions presented above. Both principals were asked a plain abstract question: what does social justice mean? They both described it as 'fairness' which they understood as giving each person his/her due and being treated as you would treat others. For the Highland School principal, 'fairness' presupposed that:

> [I]t all comes back to if you are satisfied with that situation, then I will say is socially just. But you have also situations where if that was me in that situation I would not feel socially just.

While, for the principal at Lowland School 'fairness' as social justice was constructed as:

> I will bring it back to a personal level. I want to treat people the way I would like them to treat me and I think that you can carry that over into social areas.

These responses are a useful initial approximation but they only provide a broad, abstract definition of social justice. According to Miller (1992: 557) when looking at beliefs about social justice there is a

chance that people respond according to 'the views that they think they ought to hold according to some imbedded theory', rather than, 'the operational beliefs that would guide them in a practical situation'. If we want to understand what social justice is for rural education we need to dig deeper.

Contextualising the Principals' Responses: distributive justice

Both principals present strong arguments for distributive injustice in areas that are problematic for rural schools: recruiting and retaining teachers, school facilities, breadth of curriculum and funding. The Highland School principal describes different challenges that can be addressed through the liberal idea of distribution of social goods. In the area of recruiting and retaining staff Highland School has had a stable period but the retirement of several teachers in the next five years opens a transition of renewing the teaching staff. In this, the school faces a challenge common to many schools across Victoria. A survey of 505 school principals across Victoria found that 64 per cent of all secondary school principals stated that their school had experienced problems in the recruitment and retention of teachers over the past year (AEU, 2007).[5] Furthermore, 57 per cent of secondary school principals said that they had programmes being taught by teachers unqualified in the curriculum area (the areas most in need are: technology studies, maths, LOTE and information technology) (AEU, 2007). Thus, the issue of recruiting and retaining teachers still remains a critical concern in rural education. A national survey on science, ICT and mathematics education in rural and remote Australia found that teachers in provincial and remote areas where respectively twice and six times as likely as their Metropolitan and Provincial City colleagues to report high annual staff turnover rates in their schools (Lyons et al., 2006).

Another major concern for Highland School is the post-school destination of its students, aggravated by the lack of employment in the local area and the increasing cost of tertiary studies. After January 2006, the 'Jobs Pathway Programme' has been replaced by a programme called 'Youth Pathways'. According to the Federal government (DEST, 2006), the 'Jobs Pathway Programme' gave general career information, advice and assistance to young people aged 13 to 19. The programme serviced 1,700 schools across Australia. The new programme, 'Youth Pathways', primarily focuses on retaining or re-engaging young people in schools; engaging young people in non school-based education (vocational learning and training); and preparing participants for effective engagement with Job Network[6] activities. The Federal government claims that more schools will be serviced by the new programme. However, according to the Highland School principal, his students interested in participating in the new programme will have to travel almost three hours to the nearest rural centre. In that sense, the discontinuation of the 'Jobs Pathways Programme' by the government is prohibitive and creates discrimination related to cost and time of travel for his rural students:

> I am not happy with that [the discontinuation of the 'Jobs Pathways Programme'] because it discriminates against us… In the past or up until this year there was a system in place that catered for our needs and I can see as of next year we will miss out. Basically, seeing students that were looking at their options, whether they will pursue some kind of employment path or they will go into further education, they had an opportunity to sit down with an expert, a very experienced person and discuss their options… We got a careers teacher and careers advisor but it was more than that. This person had really established links throughout the whole district and the wider community; she had expertise on linking kids to Centrelink, for example, to employment agencies, all sorts of places… There is going to be a little bit of a void out there and it will be left to the schools to try and fill that void and we won't have the same expertise or the contacts.

The Australian Education Union annual survey in Victoria showed that 48 per cent of principals thought they were financially worse off than last year. More than 70 per cent of principals felt that they had inappropriate resources to provide quality education in their schools (AEU, 2007). Overall, principals believed they were being asked to do more with fewer resources. The Highland School principal also finds that current times are becoming financially more difficult than in the past. The school budget presents another area of distributive injustice for the principal:

> I am satisfied with our school budget at the moment. However, it is decreasing over time and that's because in the past we were fortune (sic) enough to basically be given an extra teacher because of another programme that was introduced… and that teacher is being taken [financially] off us over the next two years, so effectively we have to reallocate the funds to fund another teacher. So where in the past we were relatively comfortable because of that extra teacher, [now] it got cut off…

Highland School is eligible for additional funding under the 'Location Index'. This Index compensates a school for its distance – and its associated cost – from Melbourne and regional centres and nearby schools. The principal is not satisfied with it:

> There is a [Location] 'Rurality Index' that gets into the 'funding formula'… [but] it's insignificant, really it is. Our phone bill compared to a city school will chew up the 'rurality funding'. That's an area that they [the government] could improve but I don't think it will happen [because] there is no push for it. There is no political interest from the state. And this money is from the state.

The principal at Lowland School presents a more critical account of his relation with the government in terms of the distribution of resources. One of his main concerns also revolves around issues of recruiting and retaining staff and the improvement of facilities. These issues have direct implications for the quantity and quality of courses that the school can offer:

> There are a lot of areas [for improvement] but the main one is our facilities. I don't think that we receive nearly enough money for staffing… we can't offer some of the subjects to small numbers of students, which I'm told we can't afford at times, [so] we lose those students often to private schools… Their [State government] priorities are very different to mine. I believe facilities and tangible things are very important in schools. They [State government] would see the main agenda is to try and change the way people teach, so we're involved in a 'lead schools' project, an innovation. It's an excellent project but all of the money is earmarked for educators and some of that money I believe is being wasted. I think that, I wish some of that money was put into facilities. It's not much good having people who are very capable in teaching, say ICT [Information, Communication & Technology] and you don't have the computers and software to work with.

School principals across Victoria concur with Lowland School's situation, claiming that schools need better facilities. 86 per cent said their school needed an equipment upgrade (in ICT hardware/software) and 77 per cent said their school had urgent maintenance needs (in painting, repairing gutters, downpipes and roofs and toilet maintenance) (AEU, 2007).

The principal at Lowland School sees the lack of funding contributing to a discontinuation of some courses that result in less courses being offered overall. The school finds itself in an uneven playing field competing with nearby independent schools within a quasi-market educational system. The financial undermining of his school poses the threat of losing more students to the private schools and in effect creating a 'brain drain' for Lowland School. According to Ryan and Watson (2004) one of the consequences for the increasing level of private school subsidies in Federal and States grants is the drift of students from public to private schools. The Council for the Australian Federation (2007: 13) affirms that 'there is a benefit for advantaged students in keeping company with similarly advantaged students but a compounded disadvantage for disadvantaged students keeping company with others like themselves'. Most importantly for the social cohesion of society at large, a higher proportion of public school students now come from low socioeconomic status backgrounds than three decades ago (Ryan & Watson, 2004). From 1996 to 2006, the number of full-time students attending government schools grew by 1.2 per cent while the number attending non-government schools increased by 21.5 per cent

(ABS, 2006). This is a trend that Lowland School is familiar with and the principal identifies the causes with a lack of funding and breadth of curriculum:

> LS principal: There's more federal money going into private schools than there should be. We're mainly funded by the State [government]. Obviously private schools don't get as much money as we do but the argument is whether they are still getting far too much. Every dollar they get is a dollar we don't get. And it's all political; it's a balancing act. Governments try to keep the appearance with independent school students… Independent schools would probably see that differently.
>
> Interviewer: Have you been losing some students to independent schools?
>
> LS principal: Yes, not many but we do. It will escalate if we don't spend. I think money on some of those things that I've mentioned... we can't offer the programs that the independent schools are offering. Inevitably we're going to lose some of our better students to independent schools… [T]here's a feeling an independent school can offer more than we can in some areas. And that is true, they can. And again it's mainly financial… I'm saying that government schools have got to do a lot more and there's got to be a lot more money spent in government schools, if we are going to compete with independent schools on a level playing field. We can't compete with them if we're the poor relatives.

Moving beyond the distributive dimension

The associational dimension of social justice is also clearly represented in both principals' discourses. A problematic issue within rural education is the lack of consultation of policymakers towards rural school participants –school staff, parents and students– who tend to be the target of many reforms but randomly take part in the policy making process (HREOC, 2000). The lack of participation in the decision-making process accentuates the gap between what happens in rural schools and the needs of their communities. Generic reforms pursuing national economic goals are ultimately short-lived because they are not meaningful for local rural people (HREOC, 2000). It becomes an imposition of policy from outside that can decontextualise learning for many students and communities. Both principals' requests for more participation are linked to a politics of scepticism towards the government policy process and its educational 'product'. The Highland School principal asserts:

> I think like all governments they might consult with people who they think they are going to give them the answer they want and I think that's just politics. On the surface there is consultation but I don't know how real it is. I don't think it gets too deep.

The Lowland School principal is more critical of the government. He believes that principals and teachers are not only constantly bombarded with new policies and directions to follow but he also has doubts about their purpose and applicability:

> Well I've become very cynical about it all. I'm a great believer that if we want to make changes in education... principals should be involved in the decision-making and have a very important say as to what they introduce into their own school. That doesn't happen. Most of the decisions are made in the ivory towers and imposed on us… I don't believe that the policies are always made for educational reasons, they're made for political reasons and I don't like that.

Both principals present a sceptical political view of the state's interest in rural areas. They believe they are left out of policy decision-making. Brett (2007) argues that with the introduction of neo-liberal policies in the 1980s, the state has allowed market forces to redistribute resources, cutting government services which contributed to the decline of many rural communities. This led to a widespread feeling by rural people 'of being forgotten and unheeded' (Curtin, 2004; in Brett, 2007: 14). In a sense, both principals reproduce a similar feeling of belonging to the margins of the educational spectrum with scarce and superficial participation in policy decision-making.

So far, the principals' emphasis on social justice is expressed in the rights and needs of social goods and in the desire to participate in policy decision-making spheres**.** However, recognitional issues do not feature as prominently for either principal. They agreed that there were still some issues of discrimination and social marginalisation for some groups in their communities and schools. At Highland School students with unemployed parents receiving a government pension are the marginal group in the school and the community. Different groups live in poverty, including farmers and the unemployed.

> HS principal: We have some poverty issues. I think there are things that go with poverty that are probably more important than just the financial situation and there are certainly some farmers that have been in dire straits in terms of their financial situation but they have a mindset which allows them to fit with the rest of the community**.** There are some people in the majority group which look down on the others and some in the majority that will include them tomorrow.
>
> Interviewer: How does this impact on the children of the minority?
>
> HS principal: It impacts on them as well.

The principal recognises issues of discrimination within the school that are directly a product of some parents' socioeconomic condition:

> Interviewer: Are there any different groups in the school?

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> HS principal: In terms of groups there is probably really no identifiable set of groups, some kids socialise well and some kids don't.
>
> Interviewer: Have you ever seen any case of discrimination?
>
> HS principal: [It] goes to those who have and those who have not. Some kids because their home life they come to school in fairly ragged, and their clothes are not so clean or not so new and they have had problems in the past.

In Lowland School the group at the margin are the Aboriginal students. They represent five per cent of the school population. The principal acknowledges that there is discrimination but believes that overall they are well integrated to the mainstream population of the school and the community at large.

> Yes, we have about five per cent are Koori. They are integrated extremely well here but occasionally there is some discrimination. Occasionally they get the odd racist taunt but in the main they've been integrated very well. Far better than some of the schools I've been in with Koori students. But there can always be a little bit of racial tension. I think they integrate extremely well. I tell you why. We sometimes get some Koori funding, and the parents of the Koori students want it spend on all the students in the school, they don't want it just spend on their own children. And I really admire them for that. So they've put themselves out to integrate and be one of us.

Although the Lowland School principal states that his Koori students' integrate well, disparities continue to exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student outcomes. In Australia only 40.1 per cent of Indigenous students reach Year 12 compared to 75.9 per cent of non-Indigenous students (ABS, 2006). Furthermore, a variety of research shows that there is a strong correlation between low socioeconomic background and low educational achievement (Council for the Australian Federation, 2007; Holmes-Smith, 2006; Lamb et al., 2004; Teese et al., 2003). Thus, although the two school principals place emphasis on the recognitional dimension of social (in)justice, the research shows that it features strongly in educational outcomes.

In the following section I present different aspects of neo-liberalism which impact on how the two principals view social justice.

Neo-liberalism and the Changing Role of Principals

In the last two decades, educational policies have been shaped by the neo-liberal vision of restructuring the Australian economy to compete in a complex international market (Haynes, 2002). This approach has replaced the former dominant vision of education based on social justice and equal

opportunity with one based on 'new managerialism', strict accountability and constant assessment (Apple, 2003).

Researchers argue that within the neo-liberal framework, there has been an educational shift to individualisation where the neo-liberal conception of the individual is grounded in an idea of rationality, maximisation, productivity and self-interest (Apple, 2001; Ball, 2001; Roberts, 2006). In this neo-liberal landscape, principals, teachers and students are represented and encouraged to think and view themselves as individuals who, 'add value' to themselves, live an existence of calculation, and improve their productivity (Ball, 2001).

Competition between public and private schools has deepened in Australia creating a quasi-privatization of public education (Dempster et al., 2001). Dempster et al. (2001: 1) describe quasi-privatization when public schools are put in a position where they have to differentiate and compete with their private counterparts 'in response to demands of the education marketplace'. This restructuring of public education has promoted a 'user-pays' culture among parents and students and public scrutiny through standard testing, performance and financial accountability. Parents, and the wider community, construct images of 'good schools' and 'bad schools' (Ball, 2006), which emphasise a shift 'from student needs to student performances and from what the school does for the student to what the student does for the school' (Apple, 2001: 413).

In Highland and Lowland schools the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) results are awaited with great expectation by the community, symbolising the measure of success or failure of the school academic year. The Lowland School principal comments:

> Interviewer: Does the community await the VCE results?
>
> LS principal: Yes, they do. There's certainly a bit of that. They get very excited about VCE results coming, and if we get some good results then they are very pleased for our students. And if we didn't get some good results at least in most years they would be disappointed with the school.

While Highland School is the recipient of 'unsatisfied' parents from an 'unsuccessful' government school from a nearby town, Lowland School is the school that 'unsatisfied' parents move their children out of for an independent school close by. Parents are encouraged to see 'choice of school' as the way that they ensure their children's success in this competitive market (Ball, 2006). School principals are inevitably implicated in this 'competitive' market, and examination results are used as a marketing tool.

This systemic pressure of presenting the school as a 'successful' case is related to the change in the role of the school principal. There has been a shift in emphasis in the principals' role from participative, professional, humanistic and social democratic practices towards technical, managerial, market-oriented practices (Gewirtz, 2002). Thomson's (2001: 7) analysis of the discourses of educational administration literature and policy frameworks found that principals' work involved activities such as 'supervising, auditing, planning, managing money, introducing information technologies and people, working on structural issues and watching backs'. This new characterisation of the role of school principals is modelled on business management, following the logic of public services in direct competition with the private sector. Thrupp and Wilmott (2003) argue that school leadership texts are important because they build a direction and hierarchy of the relevant issues for practitioners and policy makers. For Thrupp and Wilmott, despite some voices of dissent, the field of education management sustains the managerialist reforms and ideas. Furthermore, Bates (2006) asserts that the field of educational administration has largely neglected issues of the justice and fairness of social and educational arrangements. Overall, for Bates the field has failed to make clear links between social justice and issues of educational administration. Most importantly, Bates (2006: 145) warns that calls for political engagement in favour of social justice discourses and practices in the field will have to overcome a tradition which 'has always seen administration as a substitute for politics'.

The Australian Education Union (AEU, 2007) survey across Victorian public schools found out that 94.1 per cent of principals said that their workload had increased a little or a lot over the last three years (with 64.4 percent saying it 'increased a lot'). The survey also found that principals worked almost 60 hours a week. The reasons for the increase of workload were: 86 per cent because of departmental administrative demands, 83 per cent to reporting requirements, and 82 per cent to governmental/departmental initiatives; while only 37 per cent due to more classroom duties.

When asked about their views of their role as educational leaders or educational managers (or a mix of both), the Lowland School principal believed that his role has shifted to a technical managerial one, imposed on him from 'higher echelons'; while the Highland School principal stressed:

> It is very much both. What I get told, or principals get told, from the [State education] department is that we are not managers but we are educational leaders. But the reality is a lot of my work is managerial, lots of them (sic). I have to make sure the books balance... [T]he fact is that I am accountable for everything that goes on and I don't know if it comes to trust but when the order comes through and the order says that that should have been done they look at me, they don't look at the staff. And there are some things that I ignore, I cannot be everywhere. Yes,

> it is just managerial… [I]t is probably a size of school which allows for the educational leadership to blossom.

The two rural school principals agree with the idea that their work has become that of a technical manager concerned with 'things getting done' (Thomson, 2001: 13). What this shows is that the ethical climate of schools has shifted in emphasis with the predominance of competition before cooperation and the individual before the social. Principals are constrained by an educational policy environment of 'high-stakes assessment and accountability' (Furman, 2003: 5; in Bates, 2006: 145) that does not contribute towards addressing a pluralistic notion of social justice.

Towards a pluralistic notion of social justice for rural education

As the latest document by the State and Territories education departments asserts, schooling should teach young people the right skills for future participation in society and should promote social cohesion by skilling students with the ability to relate their own values and traditions with the experiences of others (Council for the Australian Federation, 2007). Furthermore, the document stresses that the 'need for schools to be inclusive of children of diverse socio-economic (cultural and linguistic) backgrounds remains paramount' and that 'schooling should never seek to make every student the same' (p.17). The document also describes the role of school principals. School principals 'have the critical role of establishing and driving the school culture' and 'need to learn and inspire professional learning' (p.18). School cultures, as well as social justice itself**,** are dynamic and changeable. As leaders of schools, principals are one of the critical agents that can draw and re-draw the boundaries of social justice.

In a sense, these boundaries of social justice are re-drawn by the daily pressures faced by school principals. Under a neo-liberal framework, these two rural school principals put the weight on the distributive and associational dimensions and, to a lesser degree, they stress recognitional justice. In analysing the comments of the principals I do not want to suggest that they are oblivious to any form of discrimination or, even worse, that they promote it. What comes through strongly in both interviews is that principals believe they do not have enough resources to provide and deliver a high quality of education. The reasons they focus heavily on the distributive side can be found in the way they are measured against performance and accountability in a competitive educational market. I would argue that in this environment the need for material resources becomes critical for principals to perform.

Both principals believe an unequal distribution of resources –decreasing funding, the run-down facilities, the inability to offer a broad curriculum and the difficulties to recruit and retain staff–

creates educational disadvantages in rural schools. This lack of resources has implications for rural students in achieving a relevant and high-quality of education that will allow them to fully participate in the different spheres of society. In the case of Lowland School it also impacts on their 'competition' with the nearby private school. Under-resourced public schools face the challenge of losing students to private schools, thus becoming a residual option for low socioeconomic families that cannot afford the fees in private schools. More over, some rural students lack the chance of 'choice' because they do not have a private school close by.

For socially just outcomes, the respect and recognition of different social groups is also paramount for rural schools. The promotion and celebration of students' self-esteem, identity and expression is critical to achieving an inclusive school culture. To ensure that inequalities are addressed and corrected, principals need to embrace a pluralistic view of social justice which includes the recognitional dimension of social justice. The boundaries should be drawn in a way that includes all three dimensions. Dominant discourses of social justice that focus too narrowly on the distributive dimension render unrecognizable the cultural perspectives of marginal social groups (Young, 2006). The dimension of recognitional justice opens several questions: what are the educational implications for socially marginalized students when they lack of social and cultural recognition? What educational meaning do these rural schools have for students outside the mainstream dominant group? In a sense, a lack of recognition of diversity can produce an 'unfair normalization' of the culture of the school. Within the institution, its discourses, symbols and practices might require all students to exhibit beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that are assumed as the norm but for which some students 'are unable to exhibit, or can only exhibit at an unfair cost of themselves' (Young, 2006: 96). In sum, the reinforcement of a school culture that unwittingly privileges one type of socioeconomic and cultural background over others can be detrimental for the educational aspirations of any young person from a different background. By putting the weight on one dimension rather than another, school principals can change the nature of the school claims regarding social (in)justice. Principals have the capacity to redraw the boundaries of social justice to include recognitional justice.

Conclusion

Issues of social justice still matter for rural education. The three dimensions of social justice can assist rural educators in rethinking what social justice means and how it can be enacted in favour of socially just forms of schooling. It can contribute to redressing issues of social and educational inequality.

In this paper I have looked into how two rural school principals interpret social justice within a neo-liberal framework. If the two rural schools principals emphasised one dimension of social justice over

another, it is not due to ignorance or bad intentions but a system that reinforces assessment and competition. I believe rural school principals do share an ethic of care for their students and their communities. However, the pressure to perform and manage a 'successful' school in a competitive educational market can align them with the distributive and associational dimensions over socio-economic and racial inequalities. Rural schools have the power to engage with a pluralistic view of social justice and education that encompasses the needs and desires of a diverse student and community population.

To understand the relevance of the term social justice for rural schools (and education overall) there is an essential need to move outside abstract conceptualisations, such as fairness, into concrete practices. The three dimensions of social justice bring awareness to the need for adequate resources and facilities to deliver high quality of education, to participate in the design of policies that will affect their lives, and the inclusion and respect of all social groups and individuals in their processes of learning. The three dimensions need to be present to achieve socially just educational practices. They are all necessary conditions but not sufficient by themselves.

Rural education needs frameworks of social justice which are dynamic, revisable and informed by rural school participants. It must encompass the plurality of discourses and practices implicit in schools and society. When social justice appears as a finished conversation, an agreed consensus, there is certainly the possibility that new forms of injustice are being played out. In sum, if all students are to benefit from schooling, a plural view of social justice is critical.

Notes

[1] According to the principal, a measure of the school success is the positive feedback given by parents on school surveys and the high scores in the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). Another indicator mentioned by the principal is that the school is the recipient of students from a nearby town.

[2] Half of the student population receives Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA). It provides assistance to low-income families by helping with the costs associated with the education of their children.

[3] Miller (1999) argues that political philosophers use distributive justice and social justice interchangeably. The theoretical approach is focused on equal or fair distribution of opportunities, resources and rights.

[4] Gewirtz (2006) also alerts us to the tensions within these three dimensions of social justice. For example, the recognition of a socially oppressed group in terms of race or gender can overlook issues of class or economic inequality. Or where the need to recognise the disadvantage of an individual or a social group might lead to labelling and stigmatization concluding in different forms of oppression, discrimination and marginalization. This marginalization could be further compounded by exclusion of participation.

[5] 28.9 per cent of the survey respondents where secondary school principals.

[6] Job Network provides intensive employment-based assistance to young people that have left school.

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