New Zealand education riven by class inequality

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2 October 2018

An investigation published last month by the *New Zealand Herald* highlighted the extent to which working-class students are excluded from university. It laid bare the vast social gulf that has opened up following three decades of pro-market assaults in every aspect of life, including for young people.

Written by journalist Kirsty Johnston and headlined, "Want to be a doctor, lawyer or engineer? Don't grow up poor," the report found that only one in 100 entrants to top university courses come from the most deprived homes.

Johnston analysed university entrance data according to the economic status of the schools from which students had enrolled. Each school has a "decile" ranking, from the poorest at 1, through to the wealthiest at 10. Ratings are based on census data for households with school-aged children in a school's catchment area, using measures such as income, parents on a benefit, occupation, education, and household crowding.

There has always been a correlation between school deciles and examination results. So-called "league tables," published annually in the media, draw attention to the disparity between wealthier schools—both public and private—with their higher results, and poorer schools which invariably occupy the bottom rankings. Many schools in working-class areas become stigmatised as "failing."

Decile rankings can influence local property values, particularly in the major city, Auckland. Houses in well-known decile 10 school zones, such as Auckland Grammar, are advertised as "in the grammar zone," inflating their price. These elite public schools benefit from donations and other support from their relatively well-heeled parental base and business sponsorships.

In an attempt to obscure the deepening social class divide, the last National Party government, supported by the Ministry of Education (MoE), proposed abolishing the decile ranking system, claiming it was too "blunt" an instrument to be useful.

While limited, decile profiles have been useful for investigations highlighted by the *Herald*. Johnston's research found that Canterbury University took just a single decile 1 student into engineering in five years, but over 500 decile 10 students, out of a total 2,000 course entrants.

Achievement gaps between rich and poor students exist throughout the school system, and widen at tertiary level. At Level 2 of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement, the penultimate year of secondary school, there is a seven percentage point disparity between the pass rates of low- and high-decile students.

By the time students take University Entrance in their final year, the gap grows to 44 points. Only 17 percent of low-decile students go to university, whereas 50 percent of high-decile students do.

Another gap occurs with second-year university courses that have limited numbers and high entry thresholds, such as law, medicine and dentistry which lead to professions with the highest salaries. Data from six universities showed that while 60 percent of almost 16,000 students accepted into law, medicine and engineering in the past five years came from the richest third of homes, just 6 percent came from the poorest third.

Focusing solely on decile 1 schools, the latter figure drops to just 1 percent. Victoria University of Wellington's law school took just eight decile 1 students over the period while Otago University law took three. Auckland University medical school took 12 decile one students out of 1,160 total admissions to its second-year course.

Universities told the *Herald* they didn't accept more students from poor backgrounds because these students failed to get the grades. Last year, just 20 percent of final year students at low-decile schools passed University

Entrance, compared to 64 percent at high decile.

Schools countered that universities needed better outreach programmes and more scholarships to improve "equity." Universities NZ chief executive Chris Whelan said the lack of equity funding was a major barrier. Universities were not encouraged to take more "marginal" students, and there was no recognition that poverty had more impact on achievement than ethnicity.

In fact, social class inequality is deeply systemic and cannot be addressed by quotas and competition for a handful of scholarships.

Auckland University professor Alan France told the *Herald*: "People think education is a level playing-field but this is showing that's not the case. We talk about increasing M?ori and Pacific participation at university, but actually the underlying issue is socio-economics. It's money. It's class. It's privilege." According to economist Brian Easton, NZ is now the fifth most economically stratified of the OECD's 34 member countries.

Inequality in education is a product of the oppression of the working class under capitalism. Working-class children face a barrage of intractable issues over money, parental time, poor housing and health, and access to books and other learning or cultural experiences. By kindergarten age, children from the poorest backgrounds are already far behind on measures of early reading and math skills.

Many students entering decile 1 high schools show up as reading at 2–3 years below their chronological age. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests in reading, maths and science indicate that New Zealand has one of the biggest variations in student achievement, with the gap in average scores for students from poor and rich backgrounds the equivalent of more than three years of schooling.

Inequality has been exacerbated since the education "reforms" enacted by the Labour Party government of 1984–90, supported by the trade unions and enforced by successive administrations. A "market" model was imposed on schools and universities, with self-governing boards tasked with imposing "business" disciplines and competition for students. In the early 1990s, many schools in working-class areas were struggling to survive.

In 1989, student fees were introduced and have increased almost every year. Tertiary study, including at polytechnics, has now become too costly for many working-class students. In 2017, it was estimated that the combined student loan debt of 731,800 people, with an average debt of $NZ21,000, was $15.3 billion.

Significantly, the material produced by the *Herald* shatters the assiduously cultivated myth that "disparities" in education are not a matter of social class, but are due to other factors, such as ethnicity and gender.

All governments have promoted identity politics to divide the working class, while elevating a small upper middle class layer, particularly among indigenous Maori. A virtual academic industry, abetted and funded by the MoE, is devoted to sustaining the notion that Maori and Pacific students are worse off because of "institutional racism," not class.

The insistence that ethnicity is the central cause of inequality has fuelled reactionary political agendas, including demands for racially segregated school systems and charter schools controlled by Maori tribal-based businesses. As in the US and Britain, these publicly-funded, privately-run schools were introduced by the National government to undermine public education and establish a bridge-head for widespread privatisation.

Social class divisions, however, are asserting themselves more powerfully than ever, as capitalism lurches more deeply into global crisis. Internationally, including in New Zealand, teachers and other sections of the working class are beginning to fight back. Primary school teachers held a 24-hour nationwide strike in mid-August, following an effective pay freeze for much of the past decade, and severely understaffed schools. Their primary demands were for a pay increase of 16 percent, smaller class sizes and more support for needy students.