

Part III

Prelude: Making Equity Work

Many of these papers are especially concerned with the issues of indigenous and disadvantaged people and the importance of providing an effective education.

Geoff Beeson begins with a broad approach, speaking about his own experiences in visiting schools in deprived areas. *‘My experiences in these schools always prompted the question as to whether the students had the opportunity to gain an effective, relevant, high quality education – an opportunity equal to that of other children in the state and the nation, and appropriate for the children of a wealthy first world country’.*

The question he raises is fundamental to this book: do some students have a real chance to succeed in life, given the quality of their schools?

Michael Jones brings a unique insight and experience. At 24, he is the youngest contributor in this book. A very successful student at the Australian National University, Michael will take up a Rhodes Scholarship in Oxford in September 2011. His encounter during 2006 with some indigenous children in a remote town in northern Australia made him aware of their very limited opportunities. He began to organise for some of them to complete their secondary education to year 12, thus opening tertiary education and employment opportunities. This work will continue while he is in Oxford through the Wadjularbinna Foundation which he has established. While many people are prepared to speak out, Michael acted on his observations. *‘Certainly, at a macro level, Indigenous education in a post-colonial society presents policy issues of almost Byzantine complexity. However, my experience at the individual level suggests that it also presents many opportunities for ordinary Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to connect and help each other overcome these challenges. The inspiring friendships I have formed in Doomadgee are a rare privilege and they remain an important part of my education as a young Australian’.*

John Grant brings to his paper a wealth of experience both in the Northern Territory of Australia and more widely. He remembers particularly the description about the children John was to teach from George Lee himself, an indigenous school teacher. *‘–some children were hard of hearing, some had poor eyesight, school*

attendance was intermittent and those who had been at the school for a few years had had more teachers than they could remember’.

This was a reality then in the 1960s. Too often, it is a reality now.

Margaret Clark also focuses on the Northern Territory and the needs of indigenous students, looking particularly at the functioning in education of the NT government. *‘I argue that in the NT there are no votes in addressing indigenous disadvantage. This means there is an urgent need to develop strategies to make transparent what is happening for indigenous citizens who live in remote NT’.*

Sylvia Schmelkes is a distinguished educator from Mexico. Her work was recognised by UNESCO with the award of a Comenius Medal in Geneva in 2008. She writes bluntly about the situation in her home country. *‘Mine is a third world country, Mexico. Over 50% of the population lives in poverty.... We are neighbors to the largest drug-consuming country in the world, the US, and have lately become victims of drug-related violence. The country’s average schooling is 8.4 years’.* Rather than bemoan this fact, Sylvia and her husband, also a professor, work closely with the most disadvantaged people in their country, indigenous Mexicans, to address their disadvantage.