
BOOK REVIEW

At School I've Got a Chance, by Alison Jones, Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 1991

This is a book which was waiting to be written. Alison Jones has taken a big step into the examination of the differential experiences offered in New Zealand classrooms. She has reaffirmed that pupils need an 'appropriate set of tools' to succeed in school. In doing this, Jones has revealed the glaring disparity between the skills many pupils have, and the skills rewarded by the schools. The myth of 'equal education' is tested and found wanting, as are perhaps the strategies directed to achieving 'multi-cultural' education which has been a major platform of teacher education programmes of the past twenty years.

Jones notes that a more comfortable atmosphere prevailed in the school when she returned 'six years later'. But after this particularly depressing account (Jones' words) one must ask, is the new atmosphere Jones observed simply a case of 'killing them softly'? Jones' study is an important study of the unequal rewards of schooling. It is also important as a study of women's experiences. Too often the lack of success of women pupils is attributed to a male biased system. Jones shows how the category of 'women' is not an undifferentiated one. Socio-economic factors intersect with gender to influence communication between teachers and pupils and between groups of pupils as well. Had Jones taken a further step into the layers of experience she would have found differences between her Niue sample and her Samoan sample for example.

I am slightly uncomfortable however with the combination of 'culture' in this gender /class analysis, mainly because of the linkage Jones makes between culture and class. Jones wrestles with this problem in pages 34ff, as numerous researchers have in the past and will continue to do so in the future. In an effort to combine culture and class and gender it is usually the culture which gets lost, and this has happened at points in this narration. By adopting a general 'class' analysis, Jones becomes committed to accepting the whole baggage which goes with class.

I tried to decide what factors would differentiate the experiences of working-class Europeans from those of working-class Samoans. I concluded that the major point of difference may be that the Samoans still believe in the system. 'Get to New Zealand, give your children a chance' is still the migrant ethos. Jones conveys this feeling very well. But it is this very point where a class analysis fails, if applied to the Samoan people. Getting into the schooling system is a success. Succeeding in the system is the icing on the cake. But the further question which must be asked, is 'Why do Samoan parents want their children to succeed in the schooling system? Is it a priority aim for Samoans to move up into the middle-class?' I shall return to this.

What did I learn from this book? First, that schools manifest a culture of their own. Jones has given us explicit examples of how the school culture operates and confirms what School Certificate and UE results have been telling us for many years.

Secondly, Jones has introduced us to a group of teachers who could be recognised in any school; and she has shown that, despite Teacher's College units on self-concept and school achievement, questioning techniques, and self-fulfilling prophecies, teachers' behaviours are governed by their perceptions, as are the pupils' responses. Jones' analysis of teacher behaviour is a valuable one.

In the third place Jones has underlined the intolerable burden migrant students face trying to live up to parental expectations: that, 'Every Samoan parent wants their child to be a lawyer'. This is

one of the saddest parts of this book. The parents expect the school to reward effort reasonably fairly. The account reveals that parents have little understanding of their children's need for 'special tools' for school and further, by implication, that these parents are probably unable to teach their children these particular skills, even if they chose to do so. The strong impression the book conveys is that by the time the Polynesian pupils master *this* particular set of skills, there will be another set in operation (personal computers?).

So what is the solution? Educational scholars such as Beeby have emphasised the difficulty of changing the schooling system and teacher behaviour. So do we tell the parents to change the way they bring up their children so that their children can survive in the system?

We get back to the question I raised earlier. Do the Samoan parents value the *palagi* system so highly that they will make sure their children have the skills to succeed in the New Zealand schools? Ten years ago I would have given a firm 'no' to this question. But I am not so sure today. I would have argued that Samoan parents want their children to be educated, but not because this will bring a rise in social class. I would have pointed out that many Samoan parents might have been 'middle-class' by now (if that was what they had wanted in life), but that they have chosen to use their resources to preserve the *faaSamoa* systems instead. The *Aoga Amata* programmes presently run by the Samoan Community show what Samoans value.

And then the other half of me asks, 'But if Samoan parents believed they could match the European in the European system would they be maintaining their separatist systems? ... Is this an indication that the parents are well aware that, as Jones has shown, "at school their children don't have a chance ..."?'

It may be time to look again at what Polynesian parents expect from the schooling system. A recent study of the migrant community in Sydney has demonstrated that many Polynesian parents in that city are taking their children out of school: because of their desire for material goods? so they will have enough money to 'keep the *faaSamoa*' alive and well? because of the rise in the cost of living? We seem to have reached an impasse.

Alison Jones' book is the result of original, extensive and thorough research. It is a provocative book for teachers, parents and pupils, and an excellent guide for potential researchers. It reveals the interminable questioning and endless reformulating of issues which is the dynamics of the research process. The writing style, as pointed out in the book jacket, is highly readable. At times however the 'personal' did become somewhat intrusive thereby detracting from the message.

Alison Jones has provided a starting point for further research.

I can't say I enjoyed the book (I think the title is a bit of a misnomer), but the things Jones has written needed to be said. I don't like to say this either, but by the end of this book I intensely disliked the girls from 5 Simmonds! I wonder what the 5 Mason girls thought of them?

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