

Implications of social inequality in Internet use for educational policies and programs

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THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AS A POLICY PROBLEM

- Implies digital solutions
- Assumes equal access equals equity
- Ignores addition of technology to existing mix of social (dis)advantage
- Reduces education to integration with the knowledge economy

The digital divide is closely related to the same socio-political divide that has long influenced the nature and quality of people's access to education, health services, wealth and power. Information technology, and the educational potential of education, therefore, should, as Selwyn (2002, p.429) points out, be regarded as sites of power.

This is broadly the perspective that informs this paper.

FOUR FAMILIES

- RODRIGUEZ – Fernando, Luisa, Carmen (11), Lydia (5)
- BROWN – Jenny, Brad (14), Lizzie (12)
- LAWFORD – Helen, Brendan, Angela (6)
- LAKE – Sara, Ray, Felicity (15), Sally (13)

Rodruiguez family

Fernando: Most of my English is factory English, you know?

[Fernando comes in and looks on and smiles. He appears proud that Carmen is so competent on the computer]

Fernando: You see? [gesturing that Carmen is operating various functions]

Interviewer: Very quick. [indicating to Fernando that Carmen knows her way round the keyboard and is not fumbling keys]

[Fernando laughs and gestures that he is not at all competent on the computer. He throws up his hands.]

Rodruiguez family

Luisa: Everything computer is new for me ... But if I want to communicate with my daughter I have to know about this, and I'm supposed to know more than her – because I'm the mother. I still believe that mums should know more.

Luisa and Fernando say they seek 'excellence' in education, which is why they are prepared to pay fees and send Carmen to a Catholic girls' school so far away from home.

Brown family

Jenny says she is interested in its educational benefits for Brad and Lizzie: 'I mean, they're the future and they're gonna take over everywhere and so it was like, well, it will definitely help them look up things'.

All three use the computer to go to chat rooms: all three say how they enjoy meeting people from a range of countries, backgrounds and different ages.

Brown family

Jenny: There are ones that you don't trust and you'd more or less pick that up as soon as they say hello to you, just from different things they say, so it's normally: 'All right, thank you very much, goodbye, gotta go'. Whereas the others, I mean, the others you can be picky and choosy and it's like, 'no, speak to someone that sounds a little more genuine'

Brown family

Jenny claims the computer has 'changed our life'. The virtual world of chat has become her social focus and she relishes the friendships and relationships that have developed from it. She says: 'I feel like I've got friends on the computer. There's friends I can talk to, have a laugh with'. After being energised by having friends 'in the computer' after years of 'feeling like a nothing', Jenny is talking for the first time about getting a job: 'It's amazing what chatlines can do!'

Brown family

Brad Brown 'hates school'. He says: 'I hate wakin up for it. I hate goin to it. I hate comin home and havin to work for it ...just everyfin about it. I just hate everyfin about school'.

Although Greenacres Secondary College is a big school, Brad is described as the sort of student 'every teacher knows'. He was 'kept down' at the end of year 7 and made to repeat. Failing year 7 is very rare, even in schools like Greenacres that have a relatively low level of academic success.

Lawford family

Helen has an unusual background for such a corporate high flier – quite similar in fact to that of Jenny Brown. Helen's parents were among the wave of British immigrants in the 1950s who settled in a brand new satellite city just north of Adelaide, near other working class suburbs like Happy Valley and Paradise. Few of the kids who attended schools like Satellite High in the 1970s completed their secondary schooling, much less went on to higher education. Helen did both.

Lake family

The favourite family computer activity is playing *Civilisation*. Sally describes it as ‘a particularly addictive game’ and adds: ‘Sadly, this is what I do most of the time’. She likes to play the part of ‘someone like Catherine the Great, but called Bob – easier to remember’. The family consider this game feeds their love of history and culture.

Discussion

Cultural capital includes all the attributes, including education, literacy, and social graces, with which an individual is endowed. An example of cultural capital is the desire of some of the parents (Lake, Lawford and Rodriguez) that their children attain 'excellence' in education. In the case of the Lakes and the Lawfords, this expectation would seem realistic enough. Good educational outcomes would seem a normal and 'natural' consequence of Felicity's and Sally's and Angela's 'inherent' skills, networks and 'insider' knowledge of what counts as education, knowledge and culture. This is all part of their social and cultural identities.

Discussion

The backgrounds of the Lake and Lawford families and their easy familiarity with the education world (although Helen had to win such familiarity the hard way) enhance their level of cultural capital way above that of the Rodriguez family, in which the parents, particularly Luisa, are striving to enhance their children's cultural opportunities and identities through private education. But the Rodriguez family is in turn way ahead of the Browns in the cultural capital stakes.

Discussion

One startling difference between the Brown family and the Lawford family is the way the families, indeed the school communities, are perceived within their respective schools. Angela Lawford is discussed fondly by her teachers, who are impressed by the level of support she receives from her extended family. Helen knows each of Angela's teachers by their first name. She has harmonious contact with the school, where she feels welcomed, as part of her routine. Jenny Brown, however, asserts: 'the only times I've contacted the school is when [Brad's] in trouble'. She has no rapport with teachers at all. Jenny is an 'outsider' where Helen is a valued 'insider'.

DISCUSSION

There is a view at Greenacres Secondary College that the school's emphasis on technology is precisely to engage working class students and better equip them for the future.

According to the Deputy Principal:

'Technology comes number one. It's used as a kind of marketing technique because we give our year 7s a really intensive computer program. We make a big thing of the fact that we have four operational computer rooms'.

Discussion

None of the teachers we spoke to knew that Brad or Lizzie had a computer at home. When informed of this fact, one teacher volunteered:

‘I’m certain that most of the time [Brad’s] on the computer he’s searching the Net, it’s for pleasure not for anything educational. You know the sites that... Brad’s heavily into skateboarding for instance. As a teacher I have a computer at home for my kids. When my kids use the computer I like to oversee it and see exactly what they’re doing. But who knows what Brad is doing!’

The slightly desperate quest for academic success is putting Carmen under a lot of pressure to avoid failure. It is unlikely that she will ever experience the casual assumption of academic success that pervades the Lake girls' personas. For Felicity and Sally Lake, it would appear that the 'decision' to be successful at school and proceed to university is, as Ball *et al.* (2002, p.54) put it, 'a non-decision'. It seems part of a 'normal' and expected social trajectory. For Carmen Rodriguez, it would seem that Luisa has deliberately made a similar decision for her, but this 'active' decision is more problematic. The family lacks the social and cultural resources and supports that are available to the Lawfords and Lakes.

Discussion

The virtual world of chat and email has become Jenny Brown's social capital. Her children have also become engaged in the virtual world of chat, which has a curious relationship to their off-line social world. For Jenny in particular, and to a lesser extent Lizzie, the life 'in the computer' is a polished and improved version of their 'real' life; an idealised extension of what they do and would like to do, and which, to some extent, fills what is lacking in 'real' life.

Discussion

Overall, compared with the Lawford and Lake children, and also with the Rodriguez girls, Brad and Lizzie Brown have experienced greater inequalities of access to resources and life chances, making the reproduction of disadvantage, for them, more likely. They have a computer and Internet access in their home, making them part of that rapidly expanding group of the technology 'haves', but that's where the similarities with the other children in the study more or less begin and end. We need to ask, therefore, how useful it is to talk about technology 'haves' and 'have-nots'.

Discussion

The data suggest that we require an expanded, reconceptualised understanding of 'access' and its relation to equity. Access cannot be seen merely as having an Internet connection, but as a much more complex and multileveled social goal. The question is about not only who gets how much of the technology resources, but also who gets the benefits associated with such resources and how much of them.