

SOCIAL RESENTMENT SIMMERS IN SCHOOLS

By Gerard Noonan, Education Editor

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Schoolyards in some country towns have become the focus of Australia's deepening socio-economic divide as displaced "city poor" children have rubbed up against resentful children of the rural working poor.

Students on welfare or newcomers were labelled "rats" or "ferals" by others in the schoolyard who were themselves extremely vulnerable.

In a bleak presentation to an Adelaide conference yesterday of a three-month study of three country towns, an educational sociologist, Jane Kenway, said such resentment created a volatile situation which threatened to poison future generations.

"The newcomers are frequently stigmatised and accused of spoiling the community," Professor Kenway said. "The working rural poor increasingly resent the welfare poor."

The situation was often worse for Aboriginal children and the offspring of recently arrived migrants and single mothers.

"They're marginalised if they're unemployed or accused of milking the system if they receive any government assistance that the 'working poor' aren't entitled to," Professor Kenway said.

"It results in a vastly different picture that that painted by idealists – their rhetoric refers to the country utopia and a spirit of community cohesiveness.

"However, scratch the surface and it becomes clear that vigilance is needed against sexism, racism and resentment."

Country towns in coastal NSW, outback South Australia and Gippsland in Victoria were chosen because they were centred on industries such as fishing, logging and mining, which were seen to be in crisis or long-term decline.

To undertake the study – originally intended to look at the educational pressures on boys in country areas – a researcher lived in each of the unidentified towns for a month and Professor Kenway visited frequently and interviewed townsfolk.

She said it was notable that people who were vulnerable were "taking it out" on those who were more vulnerable than themselves, and argued for a role for schools wider than teaching the three Rs.

"Social awareness, acceptance of difference and a desire to help others are just as important as traditional education," she said.

"We don't just want children to harbour the resentments and injustices of their forebears."

Professor Kenway said the study unearthed considerable inter-generational stresses, with fathers often unable to cope with the idea what their sons were not likely to follow in their footsteps at work.

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