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The Myth of Partnership: Educational Reform and Teacher Disempowerment

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The running of learning institutions should be a partnership between the teaching staff (the professionals) and the community. The mechanism for creating such a partnership will be a board of trustees. (Picot, p. xi)

The process of contemporary educational reform in New Zealand has been fast and furious. Officially, the process of reform was initiated when a taskforce to review education administration headed by Brian Picot was appointed by the Fourth Labour Government in July 1987. The taskforce released its findings, *Administering for Excellence: Effective Administration in Education* (otherwise known as the Picot Report), 10 months later in April 1988. Government made a gesture of seeking public opinion about this report,¹ but the turn-around time was rapid and the Government's own response, *Tomorrow's Schools*, was published 5 months later in August 1988. After the recommendations were implemented (1 October 1989), a review of the reviews entitled *Today's Schools* (the Lough Report) appeared with further reform recommendations. Meanwhile, the Business Roundtable had commissioned a report (the Sexton Report, December 1990) which appeared to influence government thinking. The National Government, after coming to power in October 1990, carried out its own series of educational reviews which were released with a major publication, *Education Policy: Investing in People, Our Greatest Asset*, at the time of its first Budget in July 1991. This was heavily influenced by Sexton and resulted in further modifications to the structure of education reform, creating a system which is a far cry from the Picot intentions of the above quotation.

152 Keith Sullivan

For the past five years, then, there has been an ongoing series of changes and reassessments that has caused chaos, confusion and massive insecurity throughout the education sector. This paper, through a small and continuing ethnographic survey based on interviews with fourteen teachers in four different Wellington-Wairarapa schools, reports on some aspects of this insecurity.

The Background

For teachers the process of educational reform has been one over which they have had little control. The outcome has been that their roles have altered drastically, their workloads, working hours and responsibilities have increased, their employers have changed, and their job security and professionalism have been seriously undermined. What has led to this situation?

Throughout the 1970s and 80s, there was a general move towards the empowerment of children, parents and the community which was part of a drive for equity in education. Central to this was the concept of "community" which was considered important because it could voice particular needs, whether they were cultural-, ethnic-, gender- or ability-related. As these notions took hold among New Zealand educationists and community groups, a new dynamic of partnership and reciprocity became the ideological and practical response to educational development. The recommendations of *The Curriculum Review* (1987) set the stage to put these ideas into practice and to try to create a better educational environment, one in which equal opportunity could become a reality rather than an ideal.

The Curriculum Review was lauded by the educational community and praised for its democratic process² as much as for its educationally sound recommendations. Treasury responded to it by sending a highly critical report to the Minister of Finance, Roger Douglas, on 29 May 1987. A covering letter acknowledges positive aspects of the review before condemning it for its lack of economic consideration. Firstly, it states:

The Curriculum Review is liable to form the basis for developments in schools over the next 10 years. It seeks to increase community involvement in schooling, increase the flexibility of the curriculum and broaden the role of the school in the community. Emphasis is given to meeting Maori aspirations, countering racism and sexism and creating an enabling and challenging curriculum.

Having described the potential of the *Review* in these terms, the letter then stated:

However, Treasury feel the review would not be an adequate blueprint for the development of school education because it:

- holds unstated and narrow assumptions as to the nature of school education;
- overlooks issues as to community and educational values and benefits, the relationship between education and the economy, and the nature of government assistance;
- does not tackle issues of management and consumer choice. (cited in Codd, 1990a, p. 194)

But contrary to what the Treasury letter suggests, rather than *The Curriculum Review* dominating school development for the ensuing years, it was moved aside by a growing New Right influence which was expressed in the Treasury's critique of *The Curriculum Review*, and was more clearly enunciated in the Treasury publication, *Government Management: Brief to the Incoming Government 1987, Vol II Education Issues* (September 1987). During this period, the Picot taskforce was established specifically to review educational administration – clearly a response to the New Right managerialist approach of Treasury. Not only were curriculum issues pushed to one side, but also the ideology of *The Curriculum Review* was submerged under the weight of administrative reform.³

In its criticism of the education system, the Picot Report appeared to be informed by the same stance towards reform to which the teachers already largely subscribed. Chapter 3 of Picot, "Analysis of the Existing System", makes the following statement:

3.1.1 In developing proposals for improving education administration, it is first necessary to analyse the present system. Our analysis is not intended, and should not be read, as a criticism of individuals who work within the present structure. *The OECD examiners' report on New Zealand education comments on the high degree of professionalism displayed by teachers and administrators* in the New Zealand system: in our visits and inquiries we observed many occasions of that same professionalism and commitment to doing better. However, individuals can only work within the educational structure that they have inherited, and we believe that they are not

at all well served by the present one. *The submissions we received show that the system is often perceived by individual teachers and by those who work on committees and school boards to hinder rather than enhance their work, and that it produces high levels of frustration. In our view those who work in the system, and the people they serve deserve better.* (p. 22) (Author's emphases)

The highlighted sections appear to indicate that teachers are valued and that their opinions are respected, and that the concerns and frustrations teachers have with the educational system are shared by the review committee, and in fact were given a lot of consideration in the reform process. This concern about the "system", which Picot suggests is shared by teachers, presumably justifies its focus on educational administration.

Specifically, the report talks positively of community involvement, along the lines of *The Curriculum Review*, to the extent of a partnership between the community and the teachers:

The running of learning institutions should be a partnership between the teaching staff (the professionals) and the community. The mechanism for creating such a partnership will be a board of trustees. (p. xi)

The notion of accountability is introduced, but it is in terms of the institution rather than of individuals; it is primarily a structural factor and not a means of policing teacher activity.

Picot states that:

5.4.1 From an organisational point of view, the role of teachers in an institution will not change dramatically.... There will, however, be changes in the nature of relationships between teachers and the community. This will both increase the sensitivity of teachers to the views and wishes of their community and also give teachers a good deal more satisfaction in their working and professional lives.

But rather than the community being a vehicle for equity and partnership as existed under *The Curriculum Review*, and a way of maintaining a conscience in education, this paper will argue that post Picot it becomes part of the equation for teacher control. Current research data⁴ suggest that the changes in educational administration have caused a dramatic shift in the role of teachers, and rather than

expressing "a good deal more satisfaction in their working and professional lives", they are tending to express insecurity at best and dismay at worst.

Picot, perhaps because of its temporal relationship with *The Curriculum Review* and because of the backgrounds of members of the taskforce, most embodies the contradictions which resolve themselves in the direction of managerialism in the later reform documents (in particular, *Today's Schools*, the Sexton Report, *Education Policy: Investing in People, Our Greatest Asset* and the Educational Amendment Act 1991). The two models which sit side by side in Picot are the liberal progressive and the New Right models. In the first, the teacher is an equal partner with the pupil, the parents and members of the community; and the principal is both a professional leader and a colleague. In the New Right model, the teacher is responsible for meeting the needs of the consumers (pupils and their parents), and for creating students who serve the needs of the economy. Teachers are also now individually accountable. The principal is essentially the manager of the process of education, responsible to the Board of Trustees and the parents they represent to make sure that teachers produce the appropriate products. Codd (1990b) defines this fundamental conflict of values as between "one that is primarily concerned with educational leadership and one that is primarily concerned with managerial control". These ambiguities, specifically between the notion of partnership and the reality of parentocracy,⁵ and between collegial administration and managerialism, have added to the confusion and insecurity of teachers.

Today's Schools (April 1990) not only uses the language of managerialism but also applies its principles to schools. The result is a dehumanised account of optimum effectiveness in a context of "key performance indicators" and personnel management. The Sexton Report (December 1990) brings further support to managerialism. Sexton, an "overseas expert" from the British New Right, suggests that the New Zealand system of boards of trustees is flawed. He asks:

Is the board to be a wholly or partly democratically elected body representing those various interests in the school such as the "community", parents, teachers and students—a representative body ensuring that as far as possible, all local views are represented?

Or is it to be a board of trustees or a board of governors, a body of people charged with the responsibility and the duty of overseeing the management of the school and its successful operation? (p. 21)

By asking these two questions, Sexton identifies the dilemma of the reforms. He suggests that these two views of the Board are not compatible and that the second task cannot necessarily be done by a body constituted to do the first. He in fact claims that the job of the Board should be management, and that principals and teachers should be excluded from this process of managing and decision-making. He posits that the main requirement of Board members should be demonstrated managerial skills, even if it means that people have to be co-opted onto Boards.

"The concept of decentralising management to the schools through a board of trustees is an admirable one", says Sexton, "but has been thwarted by not giving the boards the power, responsibility and means of total management" (p. 23). In effect, then, the Sexton Report completely rejects the collaborative management approach espoused throughout the 1970s and 80s, even when it was sitting uneasily with notions of managerialism in Picot and after, in favour of a completely hierarchical approach. The National Government's reform document, *Education Policy: Investing in People, Our Greatest Asset* (July 1991), follows the same managerial approach.

The New Right view of education is that good outcomes are not achieved from schools which do not have to compete and from teachers who are not accountable. In other words, if schools are not subject to market forces then they are "likely to be run in the interests of providers rather than consumers" (Lauder, Brown and Hughes, p. 204), i.e., the teachers rather than the pupils and their parents. If, on the other hand, teachers are made accountable then their actions can be controlled and the needs of the consumers can be met. On a wider scale, schools must be able to succeed or fail in the free market of education, dependent upon their abilities to produce superior results. In this scenario, the teacher is demoted from the position of professional to that of production line worker, a servant to the consumer and to the community.

For the teachers, the implementation of the reforms has both presented them with a challenge and undermined their professional status. Because they see themselves as professionals, highly trained and providing a fundamental community service, they regard their knowledge and classroom experience as vital and unique. On the other hand, the reforms threaten this professional status by appointing non-professionals to govern them. However personable, helpful and well-intentioned individual members of Boards of Trustees may be, the structure of management that the Boards impose and all of the paraphernalia of education accountability, management and review do alter teachers' roles. Accountability, as a method of checking output and performance; parentocracy, as an expression of the supremacy of market forces over child-centred teaching; and managerialism, as an expression of hierarchical management instead of collegial co-operation, have altered the role of teachers and principals and their functioning within their classrooms and schools. Gordon (1992, p. 2) states that, "In New Zealand, a notable feature of the reform process has been the tendency for Boards to side with teachers against elements of the reform process". However, since the Boards of Trustees are structurally in a position of inordinate power, it must be asked whether, with the imposition of bulk funding on schools in 1993 when Boards may be forced to do such things as cut teachers' salaries or hire unregistered teachers, the Boards can continue in this supportive role.

The Case Study

Approach and Method

A series of reports has been completed through the Waikato University-based *Monitoring Today's Schools* project, and although some of the reports deal with teacher-related issues and contain much useful information (*Curricula Pedagogy*, Report No. 11, February 1992; *School Management/Staff Development*, Report No. 10, December 1991; and *School/Community Relations*, Report No. 8, November 1991), none of them directly deals with the effects of educational reform primarily from a teacher's perspective. While I was carrying out research in classroom behaviour, the depth of concern amongst teachers about the effects of the educational reforms became increasingly apparent so I decided to initiate a case study in order to develop a better understanding of the teacher perspective.

The field work for this ongoing case study was carried out with teachers from four primary/intermediate schools in the greater Wellington area. I interviewed fourteen teachers from the junior, middle and upper levels of the schools, and two principals. Nine women and five men were interviewed between October 1990 and October 1992.

In the schools where I conducted this fieldwork, I had already been involved in classroom research or had personal contact with some of the teachers. In all cases, therefore, rapport had already been established. Interviews were conducted on the basis of a questionnaire which was made up of open-ended questions. In addition, I maintained a certain amount of flexibility to allow teachers to elaborate their own concerns. The teachers and principals were all interviewed in private, and most interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Field notes were made immediately after those interviews which were not taped.

Teachers and Community: A Partnership?

The New Right argues that the provision of goods and services by the state, including education, is likely to be inefficient as it is not subject to the disciplines of the market. "State provided goods and services are likely to be run in the interests of providers rather than consumers because state monopolies are sheltered from the forces of competition" (Lauder, Brown and Hughes, 1990, p. 204). If, on the other hand, parents as consumers are involved in the management of education, then education will be open to the forces of the free market and can be held responsible for the economic prosperity of society. If the education system under the New Right reforms has to produce what the consumers want, which under the terms of parentocracy means what the "community" (as parents) and also the free market wants, then there must be not only a means of controlling what teachers do in the classroom but also a means of checking this. Consumers, as represented by the students and more specifically their parents, have a relationship with the teachers under the New Right reforms which places the teachers in a position of accountability to the consumers.

Because teachers have traditionally favoured community participation in education and came to regard it as ideologically desirable in the 1980s, especially as a vehicle for monitoring equity in schools and for providing encouragement to some of those who were not succeeding in the system, the new reform-led emphasis on community was immediately acceptable to them.

However, the reality of the ideological shift away from community involvement in a context of social equity to a business and managerial context is becoming apparent, and teachers to whom I talked were disturbed by the effects of the reforms on their power and status:

I think there's more of a sense of powerlessness than there's ever been The reforms empower parents, which is a good thing, but what they have done is take away any of the power that teachers had I don't know that parents probably support teachers as of right any more.

There is a feeling of mistrust, that we're being fed things on the one hand, but you wonder all the time what the underlying purpose is. ... There is a feeling of mistrust placed upon teachers and of our not really being valued.

Teachers very clearly regard themselves as professionals and have a clear understanding of what that entails:

I'm a professional because my job involves social responsibility. A profession serves the community at large and has some sort of social responsibility.

I think teachers are professionals because they are in a position of responsibility and are seen by the community as being in that role. And teachers spend so many years training and that is what is supposed to prepare you for teaching. Any training that you do does prepare you for it, and because of that I think we should be seen as professionals. I think we generally are seen as professionals by people. We have to deal with the public and parents all the time in our professional role.

Working with fellow teachers reminds me how professional teachers are – associating with them in the staffroom and working alongside them, I keep being reminded what a great professional bunch I'm working with, and that's what keeps you going. These people have their hearts in the right place, they're doing the best for the kids, and they always involved in sports and drama and all these extra things. They get involved in carting kids around in their cars, taking them home after school in their own vehicles because they've missed the bus or had to attend footy practice. These people are always doing a good job. They're professionals because they do it so thoroughly.

However, teachers have also noticed challenges to their professionalism:

Teachers are being challenged and criticised. There are features and editorials in the newspapers about it. I think it was the Sunday Times that mentioned that it was "everybody clobber the teacher" time. And I think there is that general feeling, although it doesn't come from the community.

One teacher thought that the community was a possible source of criticism, but regarded accountability as part of the teachers' armoury:

Because parents are having a much greater say in what we do, and because they are the ones who are critical of what we do, we need to be professional in our judgements and in the way that we address people.

While Boards of Trustees have been set up to manage schools, and to give voice to community participation in education, it is in the opinion of most teachers to whom I talked sheer luck if the Board of Trustees system works favourably in their schools:

We had a principal who had a very definite expectation of the Board of Trustees and kept them within quite narrow confines which I think was great. He kept them going quite nicely doing the books and doing all the right things and not letting them overlap. If you give people enough rope, of course, they'll hang themselves.

I've been lucky in that the two Boards of Trustees I've dealt with have been friendly, reasonable, enlightened people. In most cases I see us working together. But what I also see in the abstract is that teachers have not been part of any of those decisions, whereas with curriculum reforms and so on in the past, teachers have said what will work and what won't, and teachers are no longer part of any working party, or only a very small minority. If you're in a good school with a good principal and a good strong supportive Board of Trustees, then I think you can work together. But as a teacher you have no control over those things if you're in a school where you have a Board of Trustees who have their own agenda to follow, and a principal with his or her own agenda to follow. Then there's nothing you can do. There's no-one you can go to for help, the old [local] education board is not there, and the teacher has no control. The only control teachers have is in making decisions about where they choose to work.

If the Boards of Trustees are, as Picot says, the mechanism for creating a partnership between teachers and community, have they succeeded? And can they succeed any way if their operating success depends, as it seems to do, on luck?

Teachers on the whole are pleased with their performances and are positive about accountability as an aspect of their professionalism. Other effects such as increased workloads cannot be dealt with here. It is clear, however, that teachers think that because the non-professional Boards of Trustees have been given the power they have, and because the community is part of a new equation in which teachers' professionalism is not upheld in its own right, the status of teachers is threatened:

I had a woman come to me yesterday and say, "How come my boy isn't doing such-and-such? I teach him for two hours every night at home and he can do it for me. What's wrong with you, you call yourself a teacher?" That sort of thing. She didn't say that, but that was the implication. This sort of thing lowers the position of the teacher. Every doctor drives a flash car, so it's clear they belong to a profession. Teachers wear grey shoes and drive Skodas. Low esteem.

Ten or twelve years ago, schools were far more insulated against the community they served, and so you made lots of decisions based entirely on the school and what you wanted for the school. Whereas now, many of the things you do are judged, viewed and appreciated or not by the community.

I think parents are very fussy about what they expect of teachers. I think they have high expectations and are more demanding of what they want. Teachers try to meet those needs, but that can backfire too because parents will change their minds about what they want.

Discussion

This study shows that teachers are unhappy with some of the effects of the reforms, and are concerned about the potential for abuse of power that has been introduced through the changes to educational administration.

Specifically, the concerns of the teachers interviewed are:

1. Teachers are having to do a great deal of extra work. Teachers interviewed for this study were having to work longer hours than previously – usually 50 to 60 hours per week. In fact, their working conditions have changed radically and they are being called on to fulfil new roles. This has been imposed on them without negotiations.
2. Teachers generally regard themselves as dedicated and caring professionals who see teaching as a vocation. Through the reforms, however, they are aware of being placed in a position where both their honesty and professional competence is being questioned by a group of well-meaning lay people who have neither the professional expertise nor the experience to do this. Now that parents are in a position from which they can direct criticism against teachers, criticism against which teachers have little recourse, an equal partnership clearly cannot exist. Teachers have reacted to this situation not out of professional elitism, but rather out of an awareness of potential injustice and a concern that the administrative empowerment of parents in this particular sphere has not been properly thought through.
3. Collaborative accountability, as a way of meeting the objectives of school charters, has been changed to individual accountability. This means that the teacher is an employee and a worker, the Board of Trustees an employer and the principal a manager. This falls far short of the promise of the Picot Report cited at the beginning of this paper.

In terms of the actual reforms, these concerns can be interpreted as reactions to the effects of parentocracy and managerialism. Principals and teachers are both employed by, and can be and have been, disciplined and dismissed by locally elected Boards of Trustees. Trustees can be said to be generally responsible and concerned parents. But by

the end of 1992 they can also be said to have achieved inordinate power considering their lack of educational expertise.

Thus this paper, in the context of New Zealand's past 6 years of educational reform, has examined one small area of concern which emerged of its own accord during interviews with teachers. Not only does this area of concern illustrate features of the *process* of reform, i.e., the takeover of a piece of teacher ideology (the importance of the community) and its re-presentation in new guise within the reform documents, but it also demonstrates much of the *focus* of reform, i.e., the elevation of educational administration and the concomitant downgrading of the teacher's position. Under the reforms, Boards of Trustees become an institutionalised version of "community", and their function of administration and "quality control" is far removed from the notions of equity and educational improvement that originally went hand-in-hand with the concepts of partnership and community.

Notes

1. *Twenty Thousand: A Summary of the Responses to the Taskforce to Review Education Administration*. Wellington, Department of Education, 1988.
2. The committee for *The Curriculum Review* was set up in November 1984 and encouraged discussion and participation throughout New Zealand. More than 21,500 submissions were received from individuals, institutions, teachers' groups, parents, students, and Maori and Pacific Island groups. In August 1986, a draft report was released for further comment, and another 10,000 responses were received before the report was published.
3. *The Curriculum Review* was taken further through Project CRRISP (see Ramsay, 1990, 1991a, 1991b), and although this had the potential to continue and expand curriculum development, the ideological focus of educational reform changed in the ensuing months. Also, running in tandem and overshadowing the developments of Project CRRISP has been the National Government's shift from co-operative learning, partnership and development of the curriculum area to assessment of teaching effectiveness and national monitoring of standards.
4. See Fleming (1991) and Wylie (1990), for example.
5. Parentocracy may be defined as education controlled by the wealth and wishes of parents (Brown, 1990).

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