GOVERNING COMMUNITIES: THE REAL POSSIBILTY OF PARENT CHOICE IN SCHOOLING


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INTRODUCTION

In Australia since the 1970s there has been an invitation to parents to participate as partners with teachers in their children’s schooling. This invitation, explicitly expressed in the Karmel Report in 1973, has been repeated in many forms throughout the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, leading parents to believe that they are entitled to a say in how their children are schooled. Emanating from this invitation has been a focus on community participation and involvement which culminated in 1996, with an explicit invitation by the Federal government to parents to establish their own non-government school if schools in their area did not meet with their perceived needs. This paper explores the notion of real parent choice and community involvement, such as that which culminates in the non-government school establishment process, problematising this involvement and its impact on the schooling process, while examining implications for parents and school communities.

FREEDOM OF CHOICE – A HUMAN RIGHT?

Freedom of choice in education has been part of a universal agenda for many decades (Macfarlane, 2001). In fact, it has been considered a basic human right. It is clear that this right does not actually exist universally and it is not within the scope of this paper to consider this question fully. However, it is reasonable to assume that in an advanced liberal democracy such as Australia, freedom of choice in education should be possible.

In 1996, the Coalition government in Australia took steps to ensure this right by the abolition of the New Schools Policy, which it saw as impeding the process of choice and by introducing the States Grants [Primary and Secondary Education Assistance] Bill, 1996. This Bill allowed for the establishment of new non-government schools even where established schools were already situated, as long as these established schools did not meet the perceived needs of the parents and children concerned. This Bill was strongly supported by government rhetoric at the time, which was vocal in its support of the concept of parent choice. Such statements as those below emanated from government rhetoric:
Parent Choice in schooling is increasingly recognised not only as a basic human right, but as essential to implement an effective parent market in education. A strong parent market is essential to provide parents with genuine influence over the character and quality of schooling in Australia… Parent choice implies school systems which have the flexibility to provide the diversity which parents seek and the independence to respond to parental values as they are reflected in the marketplace. (Kemp, 1991)

Ultimately, excellence in schooling is based on informed parental choice, not on bureaucratic supervision and dictation. (Hansard, 1991: 943)

But as for parents of government school children, they also have a right to choose. They have a right to be able to choose their child’s school. They have a right to proper comparative information about the standard of educational achievement of their children, for they care about the quality of their children’s education more than anyone else. (Hansard, 1991: 1114-1115)

These statements were part of the government campaign to support the Bill and were prominent in media coverage during this period (The Age, Nov., 1996; Australian Financial Review Jan., 1997; Australian Financial Review, May, 1997; Courier Mail, 1998; Sydney Morning Herald 1996; The Canberra Times, 1996). This type of rhetoric had the effect of leading parents to believe that choice in schooling was available to them and that their needs and the needs of their children would be considered in the decision-making process about schooling.

In Queensland this has had particular significance due to the timing of this intervention. Queensland was the last State to embrace the concept of devolution (Meadmore, 2000). The involvement of Education Queensland in this devolutionary process began at the beginning of the 1990s with the introduction of the Education: Have Your Say imperative that led to the Focus on Schools (FOS) Report in 1990. In the Focus on Schools document the idea of ‘increased community involvement’ became the focus of policy. Participation in schooling of the ‘school community’ and focussing on the ‘needs of local communities’ was strongly proposed as necessary to the provision of quality schooling in Queensland in these policy documents. So there was a strong rhetorical message from the administrative level to educators and to parents that all members of school communities should be involved in decision-making processes at the local level in schools and that partnerships with parents and the community should be fostered and encouraged.

What it is important to flesh out here is what community involvement, a parent’s right to choose and local community decision-making means to government and the community and whether or not that meaning reflects a common understanding. In short what does real parent choice actually mean and how is it possible in the current educational climate?

LIMITING PARENT CHOICE

Given this verbal encouragement by government it would not be unreasonable for parents to assume that they were entitled to not only a say in the schooling of their children but to decision-making power at the administrative level. When governments refer to parents right to choose and to establish a non-government school where existing schools do not meet their child’s needs, then it is likely that parents would assume that this involvement would stretch to curriculum decision-making. If parents were entitled to establish a school then they would naturally be entitled to a say in the curriculum structure of that school. The Federal government made this clear in 1996 by the introduction of its legislation – parents right to choose meant establishing a new non-government school if existing schools did not meet their child’s needs. Therefore, if the existing curriculum in local schools did not meet their needs, then a new non-government school could be established which included a curriculum of which a like-minded group of parents would approve.
The issue here becomes the process for the establishment of new non-government schools, for although the Federal government may be supportive of the right to choose, the State government is responsible for policing the establishment of such schools. This process is governed by the *Education (Accreditation of Non State Schools) Bill 2001*, which is a document of approximately one hundred and thirty-three pages. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the process for the establishment of a non-government school in Queensland. Suffice to say that the process is lengthy, complex and reasonably precise. What is at issue is that the values and ethics espoused by Education Queensland which govern the processes of parent choice and community involvement in schooling and in curriculum decision-making in Queensland influence not only state schooling but the establishment of non-state schools. In essence, what affects state schooling affects non-state schooling. Consequently, what requires examination is what is understood by parent choice, community involvement and decision-making at the local level in state schooling in Queensland and how does this understanding extend to decision-making and choice with respect to curriculum?

It is once again important to consider the initial invitation to parents in the *Focus on Schools* Report. This report states that the demands of particular individuals and groups do not always correspond with the ‘dominant view of society’ (p.41) and so there will always be conflict and compromise. Thus while there is still a firm invitation to school communities to participate in the process of devolution, there is the beginning of a limit to what that invitation can cover. The ‘dominant view of society’ takes precedence over local needs. Any group wishing to be heard needs to be expressing views which are in line with the dominant view or they risk being categorised as irrelevant or unimportant. This is an example of how the discursive organisation of schooling can cause shifts and discontinuities in practice, which can often cause parents to become unsettled with particular processes, believing that governments are unreasonable, sabotaging their right to participation, when in actuality what is in question is the relationship of the parents’ view to the discursive organisation of schooling (Foucault, 1991).

The concept of the ‘dominant view of society’ is of significant interest. To understand how the dominant view of society is formed is an area of contestation and yet this understanding greatly impacts on the perception of parent choice, partnership and decision-making. The theories of Michel Foucault provide a useful lens for understanding the idea of the formation of the dominant view of society and how this view might come to be perceived as such by an institution such as Education Queensland.

To seek to explore this view from a Foucauldian perspective, is to understand that society itself is a social construction which is constantly changing and becoming reinvented due to discursive organisation at particular historical times (Foucault, 1972; 1979; 1984; 1985; 1989; Foucault in Gordon 1980; Foucault, in Burchell & Gordon, 1991; Foucault in Rabinow, 1984). Thus, what constitutes society’s ‘dominant view’ will change depending on what is included or excluded within particular discursive formations. Consequently, the ‘dominant view of society’ is produced by the values and ethics that are held as truths in a particular society at certain times throughout history. These ‘regimes of truths’ (Foucault, 1980) are produced by these particular discourses which interpellate individuals to take them on as their own (Althusser, 1971; Davies & Banks, 1995).

In the *Focus on Schools* document, the ‘dominant view of society’ becomes an important determinant in establishing policy on schooling. *Focus on Schools* includes a rider that has the ‘dominant view of society’ as the overarching factor. Thus, what may be important at the local level can certainly be negated by the dominant view. This becomes more important when considered in the context of the FOS document where it states;
State schooling has to accommodate three legitimate rights:

?? The right of a democratic society to ensure its continuation by instilling in its citizens a common set of values, skills and knowledge;
?? The right of parents to question the aims of schooling and the influences to which their children will be exposed;
?? The right of children to have access to a common set of values, skills and knowledge, because education, like health security and happiness, is of fundamental value to individual citizens in its own right. (Focus on Schools, 1990:41)

Therefore, if a democratic society has the right to instil in its citizens a common set of values, skills and knowledge then, only those citizens who acquire these attributes are proper participants in society. While parents may have the right to question the aims of schooling and the influences their children are exposed to, they will only be able to instigate change if this change is in line with the ‘dominant view of society’. Moreover, as their children have the ‘right’ to a common set of values, skills and knowledge, then these children will be produced as proper members of a democratic society who adhere to the common values, beliefs and truths which are part of that society. For these children, good schooling will include the instruction of these values, skills and knowledge and any parent who is seen to be trying to involve their children in curriculum which does not adhere to these, would be engaging in unruly practice (Fraser, 1989).

Therefore, in reference to curriculum change, parents can only influence change if their view is in line with the discourses that produce understandings of what constitutes proper curriculum. Again, according to Foucault, regimes of truth (1980) and consequently, dominant views, are perpetuated through discourses, which become inculcated and understood as power relations through established state apparatuses such as education or schooling (1980). Thus, powerful understandings of proper curriculum organisation are acknowledged as such by Education Queensland, leaving small groups of parents who want to instigate their understanding of proper curriculum for their children in a powerless position and unable to instigate change.

DOMINANT VIEWS - MAJORITY SILENCES

What this ‘dominant view of society’, which is produced by the discourse of the Focus on Schools report actually imposed was a particular silence. It is clear that while the policies of Education Queensland at this time appeared to support parent choice, partnership, community involvement and local decision-making, this was only under certain conditions. Parents are actually ‘unfree’ to change curriculum practice even if it is inferred that they may do so. The Focus on Schools document did not refer specifically to parent involvement in curriculum. However, it did refer directly to collaborative sharing of the school community in the decision-making process (p. 43). Subsequent Department of Education documents did refer specifically to total school community involvement in the schooling process. Statements from these documents did include this invitation, stating that ‘people (ie the total school community) directly (and indirectly) affected by educational decisions should have a say and share responsibility in the decision-making process’ (Burke, Limerick, Cawte & Slee, 1993:4). It is not unreasonable here to assume that curriculum should be considered part of the decision-making process, even if it was not specifically mentioned. Budgeting, fundraising and classroom assistance were not specifically mentioned either but would be assumed to be part of school community responsibility. What can be established then, is that it would be considered proper for parents to have involvement in curriculum decision-making in 1990 as long as this decision-making related to normalised curriculum practices (Foucault, 1979).
Focus on Schools’ strong focus was on the term ‘school community’ \(^1\) which inferred that both parents and the community as a whole would benefit from a wider association with the process of schooling. In this report, the term school community includes teachers, parents and the wider community and the participation of all of these stakeholders in local school decision-making (Education Office Gazette, 1990, 1991; Education Views, 1992). Local management of the school was encouraged with school members being asked to respond to community needs and the interests of individual learners. The report stated that education was becoming a partnership between the school and the community with community members being asked to participate in most facets of decision-making (p. 45).

However, even though it could be deemed reasonable to include curriculum in the decision-making process this was never actually formally endorsed. The key term in the Focus on Schools Report was ‘most’. It was never suggested that all facets of decision-making should involve community participation. This was highlighted in the section of the document that dealt with curriculum. There was in fact a silence in this section of the document around parent or community involvement in curriculum decision-making. The document highlighted the role of four bodies in the process of curriculum development and implementation. These were; The Ministerial Consultative Council on Curriculum, the Board of Senior Secondary School Studies, the Board of Teacher Registration and the Ministerial Advisory Council. There was no mention of parent or community participation anywhere in this section. What was mentioned further on in the document is that ‘the range of people who participate in curriculum management is complex’ (p.95). In this section, the role of the parent was stated as ‘…contribution to a discussion in a state curriculum committee’ (p.95). Thus, neither parents, nor the community as a whole were seen as contributing to the actual decision-making process or implementation of curriculum at any stage.

By 1997, the invitation for parents to be involved in decision-making processes in schools had been strengthened and formalised by the Education Queensland’s policy in respect to Leading Schools (1997). This document became the process of the formalisation of the role of school councils in the state schooling system, which included the agenda that ‘parents and community members share in the policy decisions…in helping the school’ (Draft document 1997:3). However, even though this document promised that there were ‘opportunities for the whole school community, parents, school staff, students and the wider community [to] participate in and be consulted on decision making about the local school’ (p. 5), there were once again strict parameters governing this decision-making and a silence around curriculum decision-making.

The case was that the rhetoric that was used in the Leading Schools document focussed on a change to decentralisation and devolution of management. This had the effect of promoting the idea that parents had more decision-making power in school management. The Director-General of Education in 1997, Mr. Frank Peach, stated in a letter to colleagues that,

School councils are an important vehicle whereby the wider school community can be effectively involved in determining the broad strategic direction of the school, within systemic guidelines. (1997:3)

\(^1\) In earlier documentation phrases such as ‘parents and the wider community’ were used more often than ‘school community’ (Education Office Gazette, 1989). ‘School community’ became more prominent in the 1990s as the rhetoric of schooling became more focussed on parent involvement, partnerships with the wider community and corporatisation (Education Office Gazette, 1990, 1991, 1992)
Furthermore, in the rationale of the Leading Schools draft document was the statement,

School based management, which has as a core objective the improvement of learning for all students, provides opportunities for the school community to share in educational decision making...School based management involves a considerable increase in local decision making about schools and schooling within the broad policy frameworks developed by Education Queensland. (1997:5).

Parents had increasingly since 1990 (Cranston, Dwyer & Limerick, 2000), taken on more responsibility in ensuring that the budget was balanced in their local school and the Leading Schools document appeared to confirm that this role would both be formalised and increased. This was how the document was promoted. But while the promise of increased involvement in decision-making seemed to be a possibility, the reality was that this opportunity was governed by such statements as ‘within systemic guidelines’ and ‘within the broad policy frameworks developed by Education Queensland’. This essentially meant that all parent participation had its limits and that these limits were imposed by centralised governance. Consequently, the concepts of decentralisation and devolution were not possible in the sense some parents may have understood them. The discursive organisation of schooling still privileged overall centralised governance of schooling, particularly in relation to curriculum and parental involvement in this area was effectively impossible.

This centralised governance applied also to non-government schooling. Even though non-government community schools are run by independent boards, these boards are subject to the rules, regulations and requirements set down by the Office of Non-State Schooling and the Non-State Schools Accreditation Board and by the legislation that governs these. This means that this office actually centrally governs the non-state schooling process and that parents who are part of the boards of these community schools are still required to implement curriculum produced as appropriate by discourses which impact on the organisation of schooling in general. Thus, what was considered a powerful influence for state schooling in policy documents in 1997, was also a powerful influence for non-government schooling.

RESPONSIBLE NOT POWERFUL

What really occurs for parents in relation to school community involvement in both government and non-government schooling is that they become ‘responsibilised’ (Rose, 1999). To borrow from Nikolas Rose (1999; 2000) the term responsibilisation ‘asserts our belief in a common purpose’ (2000:1395). This term has become the means by which governments or organisations promote particular values and ethics to the population espousing these as desirable qualities. Based on the assumption that people need a ‘framework of belief’ (Rose, 2000:1396) this ‘technique of government’ (p.1397) promotes mutual responsibility and reciprocal obligation as the cornerstones of civil societies. Consequently, the civic-minded citizen self regulates and becomes ‘responsibilised’ seeing this process as the ‘proper’ way to function (Rose, 2000). Moreover, the focus on a belief in a common purpose works to create ‘responsibilised communities’ consisting of free and autonomised individuals who derive guidelines and techniques from these communities to enable them to ‘enact their freedom’ (p.1399). It is through this process that individuals may be subject to technologies of government (Foucault, 1991; Barry, Osborne & Rose, 1996) thereby asserting their subjectivity in particular and ‘desirable’ ways.

Consequently, in relation to schooling, Education Queensland in using phrases like ‘the dominant view of society’ and ‘within systemic guidelines’ effectively governs how parents become involved in the process of partnership in schooling. It becomes impossible for parents to exercise real choice and become true partners, unless they undertake to become enlisted in the schooling project in the way in which Education Queensland deems proper. The result is that schooling is still centrally governed and any reference to local decision-making is on the surface only.
Popkewitz terms this process ‘pedagogicalisation’ (2002). There is a strong relationship between Rose’s term ‘reponsibilisa tion’ and Popkewitz’s term ‘pedagogicalisation.’ Pedagogicalisation is strongly related to the formation of like-minded partnerships, which work to create harmony between the partners and determine common goals. It is about enrolling or enlisting people to come on board and work with the school or the government to ensure that the proper values are instilled in children and in the community. To act outside of what is deemed proper or reasonable is to be isolated from those who are working together. In essence, this is what occurs in partnerships between parents and schools, resulting in the inability of parents to act independently of the normalised schooling process.

GOVERNING COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

What does this mean then for non-government schools and for parent communities seeking to establish these? As stated previously, parents seeking to establish non-government schools need to undertake the process within the guidelines set down by Education Queensland and the Office of Non-State Schooling. In fact, these guidelines are more than that – they are part of legislation. Therefore, this is a serious process and one that cannot be entered into lightly. It is unlikely that a group of parents coming together without a common focus or definite goals would be successful. The question remains however, is success possible, for an organised group of parents with common values and beliefs in relation to curriculum, who believe that existing schools do not meet the needs of their children?

It seems that the answer to this question is no. In considering the discursive organisation of schooling and the way in which policies are instituted as part of that organisation, it appears that the only path to success lies in adherence to normalised understandings of what constitutes proper curriculum. As such, unless this curriculum change falls within what is accepted as proper and in line with Education Queensland’s perception of the ‘dominant view of society’, as stated in such documents as Focus on Schools and Leading Schools, then this non-state school would be seen as improper and be unlikely to receive approval. Consequently, in this instance, real parent choice does not seem possible and once more, Foucault provides a useful lens to explore this point.

Foucault uses the examination to illustrate how surveillance and normalising judgement are brought together to exercise power over individuals by the use of a single technique. Examination in all forms, in schools, hospitals, factories and the military, is used in this way, to ensure that individuals conform to certain standards and do not engage in unruly practice (Fraser, 1989), that is behaviour which lies outside of ‘normalised’ behaviour. The nonconformist, even the temporary one, becomes the object of attention and is singled out and disciplined in some way (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982). Individuals engaging in unruly behaviour are disciplined, not only by those accorded with the status of deciding ‘truth’ about behaviour but often by the general community as well (Macfarlane, 2001). So in relation to parents seeking to establish a non-government school, it is possible that these parents may not only be put to the test by authorities such as Education Queensland but may also been seen as ‘quirky’ or ‘unusual’ by the general community which makes the process much more difficult for them.

Essentially then, in terms of parent choice, parents are governed by Education Queensland and the parameters it has in place in relation to their role in deciding what is proper curriculum for their children. Parents are not accorded real choice in this area as they are not accorded the status of deciding what counts as truth in relation to curriculum and schooling. According to Foucault, the ways in which people understand what is ‘true’ and ‘false’ in relation to particular events produces certain effects. The operation of particular conceptualisations of truth and falsity also allows for only specific individuals with particular knowledge regarding a certain situation to be accorded the status of saying what counts as truth (Foucault, 1980). Therefore, regardless of the rhetoric, which is espoused by Federal and State governments and authorities, parents will not be able to truly engage in this process until they acquire some real status in this area.
IS REAL CHOICE POSSIBLE TODAY?

Real choice is possible if parents acquire this status. For this to occur it is necessary for educators and policy makers to accord them this status. This change needs to be encouraged at the policy level before it will be seriously adopted at the local level. While administrators and policy makers do not take parent partnership seriously, then it is unlikely that this will move in any meaningful form to the local level. This partnership did not seem to be taken seriously in 1990 or 1997. Further examination of Education Queensland policy in subsequent years may prove that the situation has changed.

Examining the Education Queensland web site (http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/about/html/es-parent.html) in relation to this point provides little hope that parents are presently given serious consideration. In relation to parent participation the information on the site encourages parents to ‘keep informed’ via reports, newsletters, letters, personal appointments, parent-teacher nights and school activities. No innovation here! The site suggests roles for parents on the P&C and states that some schools have school councils, which require parent participation. Thus, despite the Leading Schools push in 1997, not all schools have looked to school councils as a means of engaging parents and the community in the schooling process. It remains debatable as to whether the school council provides an effective means of engagement in any case.

Furthermore, as the policy for accreditation of non-state schools, remains stringent and it has been shown that dominant discourses producing state schooling strongly impact on non-government schooling, it is necessary to look to new policy governing state schooling in order to see if there has been a change in emphasis towards parent and community involvement in schooling and hence in curriculum decision-making. The Queensland State Education 2010 document is of interest here. This policy document refers to schools having a primary role in ‘developing appropriate learning programs and the primary responsibility for the relationship between schools and the community’ (p.9). The policy goes on to state that diversity must be valued and that the approaches taken by different schools much match the characteristics of their communities. There is however, no reference in the report as to how this will be achieved merely that it is the responsibility of each school.

In theory and in line with other policy rhetoric, this should mean that individual needs of parents and communities should be met. However, by referring once again to Nikolas Rose’s interpretation of community as a technology of government, some doubt is cast on this point (1999, 2000). If, as Rose states, particular beliefs and values are espoused through community allegiance and used as techniques of governance, then it cannot be assumed that the real needs of the community are being met. It is possible that the needs of particular groups are marginalised by those, which align with the discursive organisation of schooling and decision-making.

The rhetoric of this report once more refers to citizenship as ‘part of a shared democratic culture’ (p.12). Moreover, there is reference to ‘a civil society’ and a ‘disciplined environment’, which relates explicitly to Foucault’s understanding of the creation of docile bodies and the ‘art of government’ or ‘governmentality’ (Foucault, 1978, in Burchell, Gordon & Miller, 1991). Foucault (1979) introduced this theory of governmentality to elaborate on the impression created in Discipline and Punish, that discipline acts on docile bodies to tame and subject them (Macfarlane, 2001). Foucault preferred to conceive of power as a strategy in which subjects are both productively engaged and normalised (Hatcher, 1997). In support of this Gordon states,
[P]ower is only power (rather than mere physical force or violence) when addressed to individuals who are free to act in one way or another. Power is defined as ‘actions on others’ actions’; that is, it presupposes rather than annuls their capacity as agents; it acts upon, and through, an open set of practical and ethical possibilities. Hence, although power is an omnipresent dimension in human relations, power in a society is never a fixed and closed regime, but rather an endless and open strategic game. (1991:5)

The individual then, already discursively produced, ‘freely’ chooses to act in ways consistent or inconsistent with the regimes of truth, which exist at any given historical time. As the state is comprised of practices of government, for example schools, businesses, and professional organisations, the particular regimes of truth which exist in these organisations, in turn work to make a civil society by governing individuals within them. The subject is not forced to behave in a particular way but rather self regulates his/her activities in response to certain normalised practices. The subject becomes more easily governed and a certain type of citizen is produced (Macfarlane, 2001). Thus, in relation to the civil society referred to in the 2010 document, real choice is constituted in relation to the regimes of truth, which govern the individuals who are part of the schooling process. Therefore teachers, parents and school community members all are expected to join together to create harmony between the desires of the school, the home and society, ‘freely choosing’ to act as proper citizens in this respect (Popkewitz, 2002). Real choices are therefore made in relation to dominant views and not marginal ones. Parents then, have little opportunity to act outside of dominant discourse or make choices which exist outside those made by citizens of status without being considered unruly or improper. As such, the possibility of real choice is limited.

CONCLUSION

There is no evidence then to support the point that real choice is possible at this particular time any more than it was in the 1990s. In fact, it could be said that while the rhetoric of government suggests that partnerships with parents and the wider community are vital to the organisation of schooling in relation to both government and non-government schooling, there is no suggestion in past or current policy that mechanisms are in place for parents or the wider school community to act as real stakeholders in curriculum decision-making. While there are community schools established in Queensland that support alternative curriculum choices, these schools are still governed by the Education (Accreditation of Non State Schools) Bill 2001, and as such are governed by the curriculum guidelines set in place by Education Queensland and as such are subject to centralisation.

Therefore it has been argued that the implications for schooling and for school communities suggest that involvement by parents in government schooling is limited by Education Queensland policy as to what is considered proper parent and community involvement and how much status parents achieve in relation to their involvement in the schooling process. This policy and the subsequent status given to parents, also impacts on the type of involvement parents can have in the area of non-government schooling and at best limits this involvement to suitable areas established by policy rhetoric. Real choice for parents to the point of establishing a non-government school where other schools do not meet their child’s needs becomes, at best, a limited possibility. Parent choice in the marketplace is really part of empty rhetoric.

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