ACEL
SUPPORTING EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

Perspectives on Educational Leadership

ISSN 1448 - 0476 Volume 14 Number 8 2004

Recognising parent fatigue

Kym Mcfarlane, Griffith University, Queensland

The role of parents in the process of schooling in Australia has undergone some significant changes since the establishment of government schools in the late nineteenth century. Whilst in the early twentieth century parents' involvement in schooling tended to be that of 'assistant' or 'helper' (Limerick, 1988), more recently parents have been invited to be involved in the schooling process in a more concrete way (Focus on Schools, 1990; Leading Schools 1997). In Queensland, for example, policy has been more 'parent-friendly' over the last four decades (Karmel Report, 1973; Leading Schools, 1997) with both State and Federal governments increasingly devolving decision-making power to school communities. This devolutionary process has included inviting parents to become more involved in their children's schooling at highly responsible levels. In a climate of devolved power, policy has called on parents to engage actively in making decisions about schooling and schooling alternatives for their children (Marginson, 1996).

The devolutionary process requires that a certain degree of 'performativity' (Lyotard 1984) is necessary for parents to successfully support their children in the process of schooling. Moreover, it can be argued that current levels of performance, competition and accountability relating to parent engagement in the schooling process require that parents participate as managers of schooling in some capacity (Macfarlane, 2003b). This management of schooling by parents can only occur through membership of particular categories of performance that are available to them (Macfarlane, 2004; Macfarlane & Noble, 2004). Thus, in post-millenial Queensland, parents contribute to the management of their children's schooling in various ways via acceptable or proper categorisations. As such, parents are highly 'responsibilised' (Rose, 1999) and performance expectations can also be extremely high. Such highly responsible levels of performance can impact significantly on parents in terms of how they might 'survive' the schooling of their children.

This paper argues that notions such as parent fatigue (Macfarlane, 2003a, 2004; Macfarlane & Noble, 2004) and increased levels of anxiety are becoming prominent consequences of the high levels of performativity that require parents to manage their children's schooling. Moreover, parents can only be considered proper managers in this respect if they can do so by existence in permissible categories, such as traditional helper, partner or non-interferer (Macfarlane, 2003a, 2004). If parents try to step outside of these categories (e.g. if they try to interfere in curriculum decisions), then they can easily be categorised as 'deviant'. Thus, negotiating the continuum of participation can be problematic for parents with respect to time management, organisation skills, and their perceived and acknowledged levels of expertise.

Parent engagement in schooling

The notion of parent fatigue may be better understood if participation in schooling is conceptualised as a game – in this case, a game of engagement (Macfarlane, 2004, Macfarlane & Noble, 2004). In a broad sense, some consequences of this engagement game for parents in post-millennial Queensland relate to the notion of 'the postmodern condition' (Lyotard, 1984), particularly in terms of the knowledge society. Studies by Lyotard indicate that participation in today's world is underpinned by a sense of ontological insecurity (Ball, 2003). Ball corroborates such a notion in his research about teachers and performativity when he argues that there is a sense:

> ...of being constantly judged in different ways, by different means, according to different criteria, through different agents and agencies. There is a flow of changing demands, expectations and indicators that makes one continually accountable and constantly recorded. [We are] unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others, constantly looking to improve, to be better, to be excellent. And yet it is not always clear what is expected. (2003: 220)

If this is the case for teachers, how must it be for parents? For parents, who are developing an understanding of how to perform properly in the engagement game, such insecurity and uncertainty is also possible, and indeed, highly probable. The proper parent engages, but in 'correct' and 'useful' ways, according to particular discursive rules. However, what these ways encompass can present confusion. Roger Smith (2000)

Contributions

Perspectives aims to publish leadership-focused articles of interest to educational administrators at system and school levels, teachers and academics. Contributions of approximately 1500 words are invited. Accounts of current developments, challenges and/or research projects that have a practical application are encouraged. Potential contributors may contact any member of the Editorial Board for advice regarding submissions. Contributions for review should be emailed as an MSWord attachment to d.meadmore@qut.edu.au or b.burnett@qut.edu.au or n.cranston@qut.edu.au

attests to this point by highlighting the confusion and uncertainty that some parents might experience. Smith states, '[a]s a parent, I feel under increasing pressure to impose external expectations on my children' (p.317). Smith's point raises the notion of propriety in terms of parent performance. If parents feel inclined to place external expectations on their children, then the inference is that there is some external judgement of their behaviour as proper or improper. Thus, parents may internalise external notions of propriety to self-regulate their own behaviour and to manage the behaviour and performance of their children accordingly. As expectations change at particular times and in particular places, then confusion can be a possibility.

In view of the above, parents, who stretch the limits of engagement and blur boundaries, can be categorised as improper, often by teachers, administrators and the community. When parents resist the constraints of categories, then this resistance becomes a problem that needs to be 'managed' (Tyler, 1993:39). Thus, non-coercive but nonetheless effective strategies, such as those that identify effective participation in the engagement game (e.g. parent participation in traditional categories only), are used as techniques of governance to keep 'unruly' parents in order (Fraser, 1989). Such governance of parents and its concomitant 'unfreedom' can result in apathy, anxiety and confusion. All of which can produce fatigue for parents who are trying to play the game of education and schooling without achieving acceptance or success.

Parent fatigue can manifest as a result of various circumstances. For example, parents who are experiencing frequent 'battles' to participate in the schooling process, because of its inability to meet their child's needs or simply because of a lengthy association with schooling, can become tired. Similarly, a parent who constantly engages in the process of schooling by participating at a high level over a long period may reach a point where the performance associated with this engagement can become difficult to maintain. Parents who cannot maintain a certain level of performance fall short and risk deviant categorisations. This often means that school administrators, teachers and often the community at large label parents as uninterested, ineffective or inefficient, when they could merely be exhausted from trying to engage properly in the game.

Parent fatigue may also be a result of mis-recognition by parents of what is expected of them. Parents can mis-recognise the contingency of categorisations (in this case those that relate to proper performance in the engagement game) and the compromised character of the principles that are produced as a consequence of this. As some of the traditional forms of parent involvement and participation are vital to the schooling process, then the issues that arise from such mis-recognition can be widespread. Thus, problems such as parent fatigue that may result from the continued level of performativity necessary to produce 'success' in the game of engagement, may impact on the process of schooling as a whole and on individual students in particular. Parents feel alienated in ways that are likely to impact on their children's attitudes and chances of school success in terms of outcomes.

Conclusion

An examination of the notion of parent fatigue highlights consequences for schooling and school communities. The examination of such an understanding suggests that 'thinking otherwise' about parent engagement in schooling is a necessary undertaking, particularly for school administrators and teachers. If, to occupy categories such as the proper parent or ethically responsibilised community member, higher and higher levels of performativity are required, then it may prove that these become difficult to maintain. The way the game of engagement in education is played requires increased levels of competence and performance that both constrain and enable individuals. However, both constraint and enablement may cause fatigue, as only certain levels of performance signify acceptable and desirable participation in the engagement game. Thus, other perspectives are necessary if this particular contemporary problem is to be both acknowledged and understood.

As leaders, we must first recognise how parent fatigue is occurring within our school communities. The ways to ameliorate such fatigue depends to some extent on our leadership. How we invite and sustain parent engagement in schooling is pivotal in bringing parents into the decision-making of the school in ways which acknowledge their efforts, draw on their expertise, and acknowledge their contribution. As educators we have known for a long time that schools depend on their communities in the engagement game for successful learning outcomes.

References

Ball, S. (2003a) 'The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity', *Journal of Educational Policy*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 215-228.

Cranston, N., Dwyer, J. and Limerick, B. (2000) 'Making a difference: School and community practices' in Meadmore, D., Tait, G. and Burnett, B. (eds.) *Practicising education: Social and cultural perspectives*, New South Wales: Prentice Hall.

Department of Education (1990) *Focus on Schools*, Brisbane: Queensland Department of Education.

Department of Education (1997) *Leading schools, partnerships for excellence: The pilot program*, Brisbane: Queensland Department of Education publishing services.

Fraser, N. (1989) *Unruly practices: Power, discourse and gender in contemporary social theory*, Cambridge: Polity.

Karmel, P. (Chair) (1973) *Schools in Australia*, Report of the Interim Committee of the Australian Schools Commission, (Karmel Report) Canberra: AGPS.

Limerick, I. B. (1988) *Community involvement in schools: A study of three Queensland schools*, PhD Thesis, University of Queensland.

Lyotard, J. F. (1984) *The postmodern condition*, Manchester: Manchester University Press

Macfarlane, K. (2003a) 'Searching for lost souls: Contemporary understandings of childhood and the pedagogicalisation of the parent', paper presented at the European Early Childhood Research Association Conference, Glasgow, Scotland, 1-3rd September.

Macfarlane, K. (2003b) 'Governing communities: The real possibility of parent choice in schooling', paper presented at New Zealand/Australian Association of Research in Education Conference, Auckland, New Zealand, 28th November - 3rd December.

Macfarlane, K. (2004) 'Parents Designing Schools', paper presented at Provocations, Centre for Innovation in Education, Queensland University of Technology, 5th August Brisbane, Australia.

Macfarlane, K. & Noble, K. (2004) 'Fractured Identities: Exploring engagement and disengagement in the process of lifelong learning', paper presented at Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association Conference, Melbourne, Australia, 17-19th July.

Marginson, S. (1996) 'Marketisation in Australian schooling', Oxford studies in comparative education, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 111-127.

Rose, N. (1999) *Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought*, Cambridge UK: University Press.

Smith, R. (2000) 'Whose childhood? The politics of homework', *Children & Society*, vol. 14, pp. 316-325.

Tyler, D. (1993) 'Making better children', in Meredyth, D. and Tyler, D. (1993) (eds.) *Child and Citizen: Genealogies of schooling and subjectivity*, Brisbane: Queensland: Institute for Cultural and Policy Studies, Griffith University.