

CORPORATE MANAGERIALISM, INTENSIFICATION AND THE RURAL PRIMARY PRINCIPAL

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Abstract

Educational innovations often have unanticipated effects which may impact on those disadvantaged by factors such as geographical location, social class, gender and ethnicity. Corporate modes of management have been recently imported into NSW schools. This paper uses case study data to show that while there are some grounds for optimism, corporate managerialism's downside is that it is likely to significantly intensify the work of principals and teachers alike. Moreover, the data further show that making corporate managerialism work well in small, rural, disadvantaged schools places additional distinctive pressures and demands on teaching principals. It will be argued that these demands are sufficiently intense as to hasten turnover of principals in small disadvantaged schools. The provision of additional resources is proposed as an essential means of alleviating this problem.

Introduction

This paper is based on a case study in rural NSW which examined the process of School Development Planning under devolved structures in a small, Disadvantaged Schools Component funded state primary school called Meiki¹. Devolution of authority and responsibility to make each school a self-managing unit and school development planning are corporate managerialist modes of operation imported into educational management from private enterprise allegedly to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and public accountability of schools. The case study demonstrates that School Development Planning under devolved structures lives up to many of the positive expectations in Australian employing authorities' documentation (see Logan et al, 1994, 6-7). However, the study also shows that claims for a connection between School Development Planning and efficiency are questionable since efficiency gains are achieved through massive intensification of the principal's work. While this outcome is likely in all schools, the case study indicates there are likely to be additional distinctive challenges and difficulties for teaching principals in making corporate managerialist modes of management work in small, rural, racially divided, disadvantaged communities. Indeed, it will be argued that the pressure is likely to be such that successful principals will be forced to move on from small, rural, disadvantaged schools more quickly than they might otherwise do. This can only be disadvantageous to pupils who would obvious benefit from continuity in productive policies. The provision of extra resources to address the distinctive difficulties of implementing corporate managerialist modes of management seems essential to prevent this unfortunate outcome. Contextual data is offered before describing the process of School Development Planning under devolved structures at Meiki and indicating staff and community members' perceptions of School Development Planning. The article concludes by drawing attention to the distinctive difficulties inherent in making corporate managerialism work in a small, disadvantaged rural primary school.

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School Development Planning in Context

NSW approximates a managerialist model for the enactment of School Development Planning in which 'authority over policy, priorities, resource allocation and quality control is retained centrally' and 'responsibility for interpreting central policies and priorities, and control over their means of achievement are implemented locally' (Logan et al 1994: 13). School Development Planning provides 'the means for schools to make explicit how they plan to implement, monitor and review central policy and priorities effectively, efficiently with high fidelity' (Logan et al, 1994: 11-12). Each school is required to develop a Schools Renewal Plan, commonly referred to as the Strategic and Management Plan, which should be 'a simple document outlining a program of action for achieving the school's agreed goals and priorities over five years ...(including) indicative resourcing levels, both financial and staffing, together with a yearly evaluation program' (External Council of Review, 1989: 10). Quality Assurance reviews are the mechanism employed to ensure responsiveness to state interests; they function to unite school development and accountability (Department of School Education (DOSE), 1993:1).

Meiki is a small, rural working class town in northern New South Wales. Its population of 850 Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people is racially divided and impoverished. Meiki is classification P5 primary school (based on enrolment figures in the range 26-150) and is a disadvantaged school operated by the New South Wales Department of School Education. It is the only school in town and caters for approximately 140 children. There is a teaching staff of 9, including the teaching principal, and three aides. The principal and his wife are the only married couple on staff. The staff is mainly female and Anglo Australian. Incentive transfers make staff turnover likely. Consequently, few of the staff have been in the school very long.

Given racial divisions, two groups currently contribute to the affairs of the school: the Parents and Citizens Committee which is exclusively non-Aboriginal and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group which the principal relates to as a de facto Parents and Citizens Committee. Consonant with the Schools Renewal Strategy, a School Council will soon be functioning in the school. Although the current principal is well regarded by Aboriginal and Anglo Australian groups within the community, there is considerable variation in the school-community relationship. There are those who claim, 'You're always welcome here'. There are others who are thoroughly intimidated by the school, who rarely visit, who see it as a hostile environment and who treat teachers with suspicion. Parents do not name the relation between them and teachers as a class relation but it is clear that many experience it as that. Here the importance of understanding social class as a 'process' rather than merely a 'location' (Ashenden et al 1987:266) is clearly evident. On this view people do not merely belong to a category (middle class, working class etc.), they interact with others in ways in which class relations are evident. And as Connell et al (1982: 133) points out, 'the relation between the schools and the class structure is most immediate' and obvious in interactions between teachers and parents and teachers and students.

Variation in the size of P5 schools means that the level of demand on principals in the same category is uneven. The principal's former school was located at the lower end of the P5 range whereas 'we're towards the upper end of the P5 band, so I've still got a full time class, and doing the administration of the school as well'. Moreover, while he previously had a total of four staff to supervise, he now has 15. Time is an issue because 'if you want things to change and to improve then you need to go and spend time so you can get to know (the staff) and worry about their concerns and talk to them'. Racial divisions in the town also make time demands as the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and the Parents and Citizens Committee operate 'very independently of each other, so you need work with both ... and they're both very sensitive. You need to be seen to be spending time with both groups, socialising and getting on side with them'.

Under devolved structures, the base grant from Regional Office needs careful monitoring since the principal has a 'sneaking suspicion' that, in time, unspent allocations will be used to justify

giving less money to schools. Although no schools have yet lost an excess, the principal drew attention to expressions of concern by the Director General about 'schools hoarding money and the kids not getting the benefit of it'. Therefore, judging an appropriate 'margin for error', without seeming to 'hoard', requires careful deliberation. Additional factors, such as tied social justice funding, add to budgeting complexity. As well as its base operating grant, the school receives six tied (to be spent as per submission) sources of social justice funding. The school also benefits from non-tied Isolated Schools funding. The principal estimates budgeting and monitoring of budgets alone takes him about twenty days a year. His official classroom release time, however, amounts to a mere 16 days a year. Not surprisingly, the principal works long hours before school and at least four nights a week. In addition, he devotes Saturdays to a weekend sports program.

School Development Planning at Meiki Primary, 1993 for 1994-1998

In what follows there is an interpretive account of the most recent phase of the School Development Program including a brief assessment of the impacts and effects of the School Development Program on academic outcomes. Planning of the 1994 Strategic Management Plan began in 1993 and extended in 1994. Priority initiatives taken from the principal's performance management statement were first discussed at staff meetings². In late 1993 a pupil free School Development Day was held. Written invitations to participate were extended to parents. Curriculum and program committees, including co-opted parents, met early in 1994 to devise their plans. Specifically, the committees extended their long term plan to cover the period 1994-1998 and they developed and devised a detailed plan for 1994 taking into account their previously determined budgetary constraints.

In this collaborative approach, committee responsibility for plans is so total that when they are written there is no further debate. Plans are taken to a staff meeting merely to familiarise staff: 'as far as people saying, "No, that's not realistic", no that doesn't occur. ...otherwise you'd be - you'd be chasing your tail forever' (Principal, 1994). The principal simply collected finished planning from each committee and 'put (it) into a booklet'. From that point on, the committees are responsible for implementation. The extent of participation in School Development Planning is captured in a remark from a teacher who was previously executive teacher who claimed 'everything that I was involved in as an executive I do here'.

A major innovation in this stage was the involvement of parents in strategic planning both on the School Development Day in 1993 and on the committees in 1994. A group of approximately eight parents attended the whole school development day, others came for one or two sessions. The school is conscious that this aspect of the School Renewal Strategy, currently emphasised at regional level, poses special difficulties from them: 'we've really tried to (involve parents) but we've got very reluctant parents, because they feel inadequate, you know? School, to them, is a horrible place ... and they've got horrible memories of schools' (Executive Teacher).

Differences in class and ethnic resources and dispositions showed clearly on the School Development Day.

You get some that are very confident. We had a (professional person based at Meiki) .. he was very confident. He got up and expressed his opinions. Of course, on the other end of the scale there were several there that you hardly heard 'boo' out of for the whole day (Principal, 1994).

Two Aboriginal parents were present, however, according to the principal 'if you do get a comment out of them it's something you've got to go and seek out'. According to teachers, the School Development Day agenda left parents feeling daunted: 'It was very new. The strategic

plan, you know, sorting out the curriculum teams and what needs to be in each area. That sort of thing is fairly foreign to parents' (Teacher, 1994).

School Development Planning is a costly experience in terms of staff time. In addition to staff meetings devoted to strategic planning issues, and the School Development Day, the principal estimates that: 'it took three full days of meetings to nut out what was done, then of course you've got your clerical hours. ... I suppose on average each person would have probably put four working days into it, so probably forty working days, I guess. That's just for the curriculum areas. Then on the management etc. I've done that in my own time, so that's independent of that'.

During Semester 1, 1994 the school underwent a four-day Quality Assurance Review in three key areas of the strategic plan which they had earlier nominated for review. The team of six reviewers, including two co-opted parents, observed classrooms, analysed documents and conducted interviews with teaching and ancillary staff, parents, students using a standard set of question. And again it is time consuming. It is not simply a matter of the school doing its own evaluation of key areas. In the 52 page document containing School Review Guidelines (DOSE, 1993), principals have a four page checklist of tasks to complete prior to, during and after the review.

Staff Perceptions of School Development Planning

The collaborative approach to School Development Planning surprised some staff: 'I remember being floored because I'd been involved in it on an executive level, not on a staff level and in my mind that sort of plan was executive stuff and it had been imposed on the rest of the staff' (Teacher, 1994). Although initially disoriented, she now says 'I feel a lot more confident and it meant more too because I was involved ... there's a lot of pride'. She adds, 'I can't see how the school could run without its Strategic Management Plan because that's what we do'.

While some staff members were reluctant to be involved in the School Development Planning they also conceded that involvement in strategic planning is a positive feature of their work. The major concern is that it is 'time consuming': 'I think a lot of times you know we'd wish that (the principal) would do it in the office. Just go in and tell us what we've got to do and get it over and done with' (Teacher, 1994). The time issue is so pressing that constraints of time occasionally subvert collaborative work. Sometimes, despite teachers preferences, plans are less than a collaborative effort. Arranging meeting times is often difficult. as Watkins (1993: 131) indicates; this difficulty is a result of the inherent contradictions in imposing time/space administrative structure of representative, collaborative committee system over the traditional timetabled structure of teachers' work.

While teachers express concern about the time issue, they usually add qualifying comments such as: 'I think the ownership that it gives is really worthwhile. You know, people feel that they're not having it done to them. It's a decision that we're all making and we're all having a say'. Teachers claim that compared to the former situation in which 'you sort of just got told', currently: 'everyone has a better idea ... of what we are supposed to be achieving this year'. Thus while being on many committees means 'everyone has got lots of hats to wear', and that is 'exhausting', its also: 'good because everyone knows what's going on because you're involved in most things'..

The principal shares these mixed feelings about School Development Planning. He says wide ownership, at a practical level: 'slows it down. I reckon I could knock that up in probably a week, which is a lot less than 40 days'. He concedes, however, the plan is unlikely to 'mean as much' if written by him so 'you're weighing the two things'.

Another concern is that aspects of devolved planning are uneconomical.

I think it's window dressing. I really do. A lot of the things that I'm saying in (it) would be very similar to things that have been said in other schools and a lot of it put there to fill up space, if you like. I think that the process could be shortened a great deal without having any real influence in what's going on in schools. ... I would imagine a lot of the programs ... schools would have in common that you could be sharing in the time and effort involved in it (Principal).

Given the rhetoric of efficiency and effectiveness which provides the justification for the School Renewal Strategy, these concerns are serious. Here, it is clear that doing School Development Planning under devolved structures has created a context which has significantly intensified the principal's work. Significantly, much of the new work is trivial and, he argues, diverts him from more important education work:

I'll show you what I mean. Like the budget business, a lot of principals have said that they really feel like a bill paying service for the Department. I mean I'm now paying the electricity bill that used to be paid by regional office and I'm now paying the rates that used to be (done by a clerk). And yet I've got to sit down and come up with these plans. I mean, you look at most of the administration things that I do - energy, that's gas and electricity, should be looked after by regional office. Maintenance - regional office. Equipment service - regional office. Postage - regional office. Short term relief - regional office. Phone - regional office. Waste disposal, all that stuff was done by regional office. So they cleaned out regional office and there's not the same wage bill involved down there, but they put the work load onto us and we're not getting the compensation for it in time. See, what they've done is save quite small wages when you think of the clerks and so on that used to do that stuff, and then they're squeezing more, for the same amount of money, out of principals, and taking away from what we're actually meant to be doing. They just kept on ... piling things on us and they say "Yeah, we're saving money out of the education budget" and I guess they are but they're doing that at the expense of the time of principals that have been taken away from what they were meant to be doing (Principal, 1994).

This view is not idiosyncratic. As Thody (1994: 38) points out, there is evidence accumulating to show that under devolution principals are feeling the pressure of increased workload which has little impact on teaching and learning. Of course, the distinctive nature of Meiki school also makes its own contribution to intensification. Even without devolution and School Development Planning it would be a busy place. Consider, for example, the work involved in preparing submission for, and monitoring, social justice funding. It is not surprising therefore that School Development Planning under devolved structures is seen as a mixed blessing by the principal and the staff.

A negative outcome arising from the intensification of teachers' work is that there are some implications for the quality of classroom level practice. For example, the principal expresses concern that one result of the demands on him is that his classroom preparation suffers, that he often has to cut corners in classroom planning. Teachers also admit that at busy times, attention and energy may be reluctantly displaced from teaching children to planning. Since this is a school in which the students are almost totally dependent on their teachers for access to academic knowledge, loss of teaching or planning time is significant.

Another significant cost is evident in the case of the principal and his wife. They have three children under six. The principal's wife finds her personal life and professional life is shaped by her husband's work. There is no division of labour at home:

he's over at school quite often till midnight. He'll come and have tea at about six; half an hour, three-quarters of an hour, and he's back over again which means looking after the kids in the afternoon, getting all that dreadful time of bathing and all that sort of thing, is left to me, which is difficult ...

Her professional work is necessarily delayed 'until the kids are all in bed'. The principal is also negatively affected since his participation in family life is limited. It is plausible to assume that hidden, personal costs such as these were not taken into account when School's Renewal was devised. Efficiency and effectiveness are being achieved at considerable personal cost to Meiki.

Parent Perceptions

Parental attendance at the school development day was poor. One parent claims that traditional written invitations are ineffective in Meiki: 'if you want people to come you have to go and knock on their door and give them a personal invitation to come ... tell the parents that it is okay to come to the school and to have their say'. Moreover, because many are uncomfortable in formal situations he suggests, 'you've personally got to go and sit down with that person in their house' to find out what they think. Another parent notes that the small size of the town makes difficulties since the pool of potential meeting attenders is small: "I mean you can have one meeting and just change the name every half hour and you could go through the meetings in one afternoon, without anyone coming or leaving'. Personal invitation was subsequently used to co-opt parents on to planning committees and was effective. One parent says that if the invitation had come through an open letter, she 'probably wouldn't have come', however, because of the personal approach, 'I did come'. Parents were initially nervous, even 'terrified', about participating on committees. Despite this, parents see advantages to being involved not the least of which is a positive change in their perception of teachers. One parent says now, contrary to a common community perception, she sees 'teachers as human people, not stuck ups'. Obviously, class-based perceptions of status differences have real implications for community involvement in schooling.

Impacts and Effects of Strategic Planning at Meiki

Rural location, combined with factors such as poverty and historically entrenched racism, make Meiki a site in which educational disadvantage is likely. However, the new management mode is meant to give teachers the potential to address educational disadvantage. This is precisely the point of Meiki's school-based initiatives which include a Homework Centre, funded through DEET under the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme, a school-wide discipline policy and policies and practices which emphasise early successful literacy experience (for detailed accounts of these initiatives see Hatton, 1994 and Hatton, Munns & Nicklin Dent, in press). While Basic Skills results may be a problematic indicator of academic outcomes, they do provide a benchmark. Recent results indicate that academic performance in the school is improving. The Year 3 1993 and 1994 results have been above the state average. This is a significant achievement since results in disadvantaged schools generally, and Meiki in particular, are typically well below the state average. There is therefore, some indication that the school is effectively working through School Development Planning towards meeting the educational needs of its client group.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that School Development Planning under devolved structure can be a fulfilling and useful process which enhances the functioning of a school by making all participants feel they have a stake in and ownership of developments in the school. In these circumstances, teachers lose the identity of mere functionary and feel they have a say in the

development of the school. This outcome has been achieved even when staff have some concerns about the time involved in strategic planning. If, as in this case, appropriate policies are devised, enhanced educational outcomes for students can and do result.

Intensification of teachers', and particularly the principal's, work is a by-product of School Development Planning structures. This effect is likely to be felt in all schools especially where planning is undertaken collaboratively. However, even without corporate managerialist modes of management, Meiki is a very demanding worksite particularly for a teaching principal. To the extent that there are the efficiency savings under new modes of management they come at considerable cost. This is where rural, disadvantaged students are placed at risk since personal costs, such as the costs to the private life of the principal's family, are only likely to be sustainable for short time frames. Principals whose families endure this level of strain are likely to seek to move on to less demanding situations much more quickly than they might otherwise be motivated to do³. This is unfortunate particularly if the principal has been successful in the school and worthwhile programs have been implemented. Disadvantaged pupils would clearly benefit from uninterrupted and committed implementation of existing successful programs. However, incoming principals are often given little motivation by the system to continue them. Rather, they are expected to 'remake' the school since their future progression is likely to be determined by personal initiatives.

Moreover, now that the initial implementation phase has passed, it is evident that features of corporate modes of management are easier to realise in middle-class contexts than they are in working class rural settings like Meiki. This indicates that to make these modes of management work successfully principals in schools like Meiki would have to expend an inordinate amount of time and energy to make personal approaches to parents to secure adequate parental involvement in schooling. In other words, their intensification is likely to continue apace. It therefore seems clear that if the corporate modes of management which underpin NSW's Schools Renewal Strategy are to be effective, contexts like Meiki require extra permanent resources. If, for example, the principal's position was non-teaching, he or she might have time to visit families and encourage participation and involvement. Unless schools like Meiki are given extra funding to resource attempts to maximise the fit between the demands of the context and the demands of the corporate mode of management, there are likely to be unanticipated and unfortunate outcomes for rural, disadvantaged primary students. The time is ripe for rural lobbyists to address the issue of the need for a departure from per capita global budgeting to take into account 'differing conditions and varying concentrations of need between and with regions' (External Committee of Review, 1992:28). The Australian Labor Party has, as part of its 1995 education policy, recognised the issue in relation to secondary schools. Attention also needs to be drawn to the needs of small, rural disadvantaged primary schools.

Endnotes

1. The usual convention of employing pseudonyms is observed.
2. Performance management processes are 'designed to support teachers in clarifying how their work is contributing to their school's educational priorities' (External Committee of Review, 1994:31).
3. Meiki's principal has recently moved on to a non-teaching position in a central school; which move he would not have made as soon had the intensification of his work not had been so intense. His period of tenure was mid 1992 to 1994.

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