Liberating Schools through Devolution: The Trojan horse of the state

SCOTT EACOTT

School of Education, The University of Newcastle

Email: Scott.Eacott@newcastle.edu.au

ABSTRACT: The Gillard Labor Government seeks to liberate schools through the mechanisms of devolving authority to the school level. Such devolution is often advocated for on the basis that they enable schools to shape their own directions. However, despite the rhetoric of empowerment and participation at the school level, the state, through various apparatus such as systemic authorities and publicly available data continues to set the agenda by defining what is an 'effective school'. This article argues that school-based strategic planning, as a devolutionary practice, is little more than the Trojan horse of the state. That is, school level planning has been used by the state to get beyond the school fence and into the daily practices of school leaders. Drawing on empirical work undertaken in the NSW public school system, primarily through policy analysis and interviews with principals, this article seeks to bring to the level of discussion some of the seemingly invisible actions of the state in the management of education.

Introduction

Before our nation suffered the disasters of floods, cyclones and bushfires, an early story that was gaining increasing media attention was Prime Minister Julia Gillard's plan to liberate schools (see Ferrari, 2010). Much of the debate centres on public funding and the selection of staff. There is also a rather simplistic correlation based argument put forth by advocates that localised control will improve outcomes. What is missing from the debate is a more sociologically informed discourse. It is noteworthy that when an expert is called upon to comment it is usually one-sided, for example Brian Caldwell, a renowned advocate of self-managing schools (see Caldwell & Spinks, 1988), and never John Smyth, editor of arguably the most significant critical text on self-managing schools (see Smyth, 1993), despite the fact that both are based in Australia – more importantly, both in Victoria the epicentre of school-based management initiatives in this country. In this article, I critically engage with developments in New South Wales public schools in the mid-2000s to argue that school-based planning (frequently using the adjective 'strategic'), as a mechanism of devolution, is little more than a Trojan horse for the state as it seeks to wrestle control back (if it ever lost it) of schools. The primary purpose of this article is to bring to the level of discussion the seemingly invisible mechanisms at play and their impact on the work of school leaders.

There is a substantial level of common-sense about arguments for school-based management or the myriad derivations for the devolution of authority to schools. However common sense is highly problematic. The naive assumptions of taken for granted arguments does little to reveal the discursive mechanisms at play in the management of schools. Existing power relations are merely (re)produced.

The romantic decentralist perspective from which most of the advocates of devolution align is founded on the belief that the 'relief from stultifying mediocrity lies in deregulation and local control of schools' (Timar & Kirp, 1988, p. 75). However, a central criticism of models of devolution is that local decision making is more rhetoric than reality (Hartley, 2004), as the broader scope, aims and purposes of school reforms and initiatives continue to be set by those in higher positions in the bureaucracy of education systems and the state. Consistent with the work of social theorists such as Foucault (1977) and Bourdieu (1977), the role of power in these situations is concealed and rarely called into question. From a Marxist perspective, the 'innocuous surface hides the essential nature of these schemes as technologies of repression and violence' (De Lissovoy & McLaren, 2003, p. 140). The substantial rhetoric around the local management of schools serves to partially distract from the specific mechanisms that proponents seek to introduce in its name; that is, the large scale implementation of systemic procedures to control schools. Herein lies the paradox that is federal Labor education policy. The call to rollout school autonomy comes at a time when we have a forthcoming national curriculum to complement a national testing regime, not to mention the prospect of national professional standards and so on. There is an inherent goal of standardising the education product in the country so any degree of autonomy that a school has is substantially stifled by existing policy.

Australian education systems have been some of the leading adopters of devolved systems of school management, most notably Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory (Gamage, 1993, 2005). Of note is that Australia has been one of the most enthusiastic countries in embracing neo-liberal conditions (Smyth, 2008). Australian education policy, arguably as a result of colonial legacy, has served as an ideological mirror for English reforms – many of which England is looking to reverse at the same time Australia is adopting. What is currently being experienced in Australia is an advancement of the managerialist state, a policy context that focuses on performative measures, market forces for quality control/improvement and the pursuit of global competitiveness. Education is seen as a political tool to be leveraged in the interests of building a strong nation state. This of course, is not Australian specific. Internationally, governments are increasingly focused on leveraging education policy to achieve economic gains in the global market.

Within Australian education policy, one only needs to pay attention to the increasing intervention of the federal government in what is constitutionally a state/territory responsibility (see Cranston et al., 2010). Since the Whitlam Government, and arguably as a result of the 'vertical fiscal imbalance' of Australian federalism (Lingard et al., 1995), federal intervention has focused on gaining control of education at all levels. Through recent moves such as the national curriculum, national testing, professional standards and the ever expanding audit and compliance regime overseeing initial teacher education, the federal government has used state funded apparatus to achieve its ends. Leadership preparation programs play a role here as well in the production of a certain kind of leader (see Eacott, 2011).

Substantially embedded in this policy environment is a market ideology based on devolution and individual consumer choice. School based 'strategic' planning is a mechanism for enacting neo-liberal policy with an emphasis on market ideology and competitive advantage. In the context of market forces shaping school success and financial viability, strategic planning – as it is constituted in the corporate sector – is seen as imperative to establishing and sustaining the long term success of the school. However, Bell (1998) argues that schools are far too similar to gain competitive advantage

over their neighbours and that the use of market forces is inappropriate in education. Although it seems somewhat contradictory, the very presence of the 'market' may in fact create a homogenised educational market place. Rather than run the risk of being too radical and potentially losing market share, school leaders remain cautious and as a result, many schools are reduced to the lowest common denominator or at the least, very similar programs to what nearby schools offer. In such a case, the market actually reduces the quality of schooling. I say this not to argue that this is an empirical reality in all jurisdictions, rather to highlight that education is a contested terrain and as public intellectuals, school leaders need to problematise practice, not merely accept it.

Glatter (1999), and more recently Gunter and Forrester (2010), argue that in most contemporary examples, school leaders are seen as conduits, or the local face, of government policy as the identification of what is important within the profession is defined by government agencies rather than within the profession itself. An example of this is the literature on strategic leadership and management in education. Following the *Education Reform Act*, 1988 in England, there was a considerable spike in normative literature on 'how to do school development plans' (Eacott, 2008). This literature sought not to challenge and define the strategic direction of education, rather to provide school leaders with models for planning and implementing change. Contributing to a re-emerging discourse in educational leadership that draws on social critical theory, this article argues that contemporary practices of strategic planning in schools are little more than a Trojan horse of the state as it attempts to wrestle back control of schools under the rhetoric of school empowerment and devolution.

Research Design

This article derives from a larger, and ongoing, research program seeking to re-conceptualise the strategy/ies of educational leaders (see Eacott, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). The underlying assumption of this research program is that to understand educational leadership, management and administration it is important to engage with issues of power, reality construction, symbolic order, actor networks, and language games. Theoretically informed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, this article works with data collected during semi-structured interviews (n=36) with public primary school principals in the Australian state of New South Wales. The New South Wales public school system is the largest in Australia, with over 2234 schools across pre-school, primary and secondary levels, educating more than some 737,000 students and employing over 67,500 staff. This particular research took place 18 months after the systemic roll out of formal, publicly available, school based planning. All principals had been at their school for a minimum of one year to represent the time lag between strategic decisions and outcomes. The questions and probes encouraged participants to give specific, detailed examples of experiences, behaviours, actions and activities that characterised their strategic role. The interview schedule was deliberately structured to ask principals to define their strategic role and then explore in multiple ways the means by which they enact that role. This allows for a within interview validity check. That is, the responses are compared with one another to ensure that a consistent message is present. Following transcription and re-checking by participants, the responses were analysed, using a modified form of conventional coding, in relation to the lived experience of current systemic policy on strategic planning in schools. The opinions and values of the principals not only

provide insights into what they think of past experience, but also what they want to see in the future. For the purpose of this article, attention is given to comments directed at the nature of the policy move and the implications for school leadership.

Strategic Planning in NSW Public Schools

In a 2005 memorandum to school principals, regional directors, school education directors (the NSW equivalent to superintendents) and state officers, Trevor Fletcher, the Deputy Director of Schools wrote:

> We have come to the view that school planning is best presented as both a continuous process of quality improvement and an iterative process with a three year planning horizon.
>
> The aim is to provide a three year plan updated annually. Led by the principal and with increased input from teachers, parents and students, the school community, following careful consideration of student outcomes and program performance, can set long term goals and shorter term targets. Linked to annual school reports, the publicly available school plan provides a framework for resource allocation, professional learning, system support and performance monitoring and reporting.

Note the explicit endorsement of Deming's (1982) 'quality improvement'. It has been argued (see Kanigel, 1997) that Deming's quality improvement work is an appropriation of Frederick Winslow Taylor's (1911) *The Principles of Scientific Management*. Despite Tayloristic thought being the 'mission' of newly established departments of educational administration in the U.S. in the early 1990s under people such as Bobbitt (Chicago), Strayer (T.C. Columbia) and Cubberly (Stanford) among others, since at least the time of Callahan's (1962) classic monograph *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, Taylor's work and terms such as 'efficiency' have become tainted in discussions regarding educational administration. Although it has been argued that scientific management is dead in the scholarship of educational administration (see Leithwood & Duke, 1999), Kanigel (1997) argues that Taylorism is so embedded in what we have come to understand of organisational management that we no longer recognise that it is there. Furman (2007) uses the example of contemporary U.S. educational leadership policy moves to make the same case.

In a document supporting the memorandum, a model for school planning was provided. It is described as a continuous, iterative process best understood as cyclical, developmental and adaptive, and directed at improving teaching and learning. However, it was presented as a linear decision making and planning model, conforming to Deming's quality systems management (e.g., plan, do, check and report). The delivery of such a model by the system (which is little more than a proxy for the state) to schools endorses the model as the preferred, giving it legitimacy and serving to establish the model as the norm. While not explicitly stating so, the fact that it is present indicates that this is what supervisors (in the form of school education directors) will be looking for. Explicitly, the system has invoked and set the standard from which school plans (the written articulation of the school's strategic direction) will be evaluated. The system has used its access to all schools to effectively legitimise its model, normalise the behaviour of principals and shape the ontological reality of what is strategic planning in schools. A similar phenomenon occurred in the UK through OfSTED (Cuckle, Hodgson & Broadhead, 1998) where school development plans became part of school management

under the *Education Reform Act,* 1988. The homogenising effect of the policy move was not lost on all, as one principal noted:

> I think that what we [fellow principals] have become in many ways is a group of clones. We are not risk takers and I think we need to stick our heads out a bit and take some risks. (Principal 10)

There is an underlying assumption of utility in large scale systemic reform. That is, an investment in the belief that a system or process can be developed that can then be adopted in each and every school for the achievement of some predetermined goal. This is also the core logic of 'best practice' or what Taylor (1911) referred to as 'one right method'. Most of the attempts at developing systems/processes with utility in recent times have centred on the use of evidence (or data) based practice and/or decision making. This was directly raised in the memorandum in the comment: 'careful consideration of student outcomes and program performance'. In principle, the role of student outcomes and program performance in strategic decisions makes good sense. And this is the point. The rhetoric of education policy, in this case, strategic planning in schools, is based on the logic of common sense. A common sense that is not challenged or disrupted, rather (re)produced through existing power relations. Common language, the repository of common sense, is an historical accumulation of orthodox meaning (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1989). As such it blinds us to the power struggles that shape social activities. This is not to say that some principals were not aware of what had/was transpiring. For example:

> … while the powers that be [systemic authorities] tell us that they are trying to devolve power and it is going to no longer be a top-down model, in actuality, we have become far more accountable for what we are doing to those above us in the system. (Principal 18)

> I get frustrated with the system for throwing us a red herring that we probably did not see coming. In my career, I have seen the system evolve to the point where it is very political, it is almost a reaction to a political situation that control votes. A lot of decisions are not necessarily made from a wise educational perspective…. (Principal 20)

Two things stand out in the above quotes, and the larger data set. The first is the construction of the binary – us/them, inside/outside the school, local/central. Thomson (2010) also writes of this binary being present in the narratives of school leaders. Caldwell and Spinks (1998) argue that devolution in the form of school-based management provides the basis for a new professionalism and new forms of innovation that will provide a quality future focused education for all children. Thomson (2010), who interestingly enough was a principal at the time of the roll out of school-based management in Australia, argued that there was more than one way forward and that going back was always impossible. This is significant given that the second theme present in the data is the apparent lack of autonomy for school leaders under the move. As principals noted:

> Strategic planning and direction setting is great and very important for the school and its community, but at the same time, the Department mandates what the areas of the plan should be, literacy, numeracy and student welfare. (Principal 2)

> I am a member of the DET. If they tell me this is going to happen, then that is what is going to happen. I might not agree with it, but I cannot stand up in the middle of the road and express my dissent. I do not feel that I can ignore or reject what my employer tells me to do. (Principal 31)

The loss of, or lack of, autonomy is not a new argument (see Blackmore, 2010). As a direct means of intervention, those beyond the school fence have decided what is desirable from a school and established a performative regime to achieve that result. The reporting of student outcomes and program performance in annual school reports and now *MySchool* is frequently limited to state/national testing regimes (which is all that legislation requires). In such cases, English (2003) reminds us that the decisions regarding what is important and privileged are already made by the choice of evidence collected. In doing so, the state has decided what the purpose of schooling is and how the achievement of that purpose will be measured. State targets for literacy and numeracy are highly political and reduce the complex path towards knowledge creation to a number (e.g. 75% of students will achieve state benchmarks for literacy and numeracy) and fail to take into account contextual information. The underlying assumption is the production of economically productive citizens. Meeting such targets become the criteria for the assessment of school performance and by virtue, school leaders. During an interview a principal noted:

> Being effective is what it is all about. Defining effective requires you to go back to your goals and targets and seeing how you are going. You need hard data to support your case.
> (Principal 36)

If the targets are set by those beyond the school and the measures are a narrow proxy of the complex practice of student learning, not to mention frequently judged in a de-contextualised manner, then this is problematic and as public intellectuals, educational leaders need to collectively speak back, or even over, policy. Each year governments leverage large scale test results, whether they be international such as PISA or TIMSS or even national such as NAPLAN, to argue for declining or stable results. Frequently, what is politically constructed is a literacy and/or numeracy crisis in school leavers. Once again using the argument of common sense, politicians, and to some extent greater society, call for the reform of education – a return to the good old days of the three Rs. In the contemporary world of politics, raising the standards of education and national productivity is vital for long term political success. The means to deliver such reforms are usually carefully crafted systemic procedures, such as the standardisation of education (drawing on mechanisms such as national testing, curriculum and teaching standards), school based strategic planning (focused on improving results in standardised testing), and funding regimes based on school performance (the *MySchool* website plays a significant role here). Yet, Wilkinson and Pickett's (2010) *The Spirit Level* explicitly demonstrates that the greatest disparity in education occurs in societies where the gap between the haves and the have nots is greatest. Therefore, performative regimes which seek to redistribute resources in an attempt to raise the levels of under-performing students are actually aiming at the wrong target. The problem is not so much with the school or the teachers, but rather society at large. Schooling in fact is (re)productive for existing power relations. The results of standardised testing have more to do with the difference between those who have the necessary social capital to participate in the game of schooling and those that do not. The constitution and legitimising of distinctions between individuals and groups is extended through large scale systematic means, such as schooling.

> I feel that some people are getting lost in thinking that they have to satisfy the Department's requirements as opposed to looking at individual needs. I previously worked at a school where the results [in basic skills testing] were not what the Department expected. They [the Department] kept telling me that I had to do this and that. Every year the results just never

> matched the external expectations because of the cohort of children that I was working with. But the children were engaged in their learning and they were learning. Maybe not the same level as other schools, but they can still work and be happy in life, function and be engaged in learning and enjoying school life. There is just so much pressure from the top to conform and I think that people get lost in that and just want the numbers to look right, and that is a shame. (Principal 34)

What appears to be a responsive move by politicians (attention to schools not reaching state/national benchmarks) is little more than a power play by those with substantial influence in society. Moves which seek more to maintain existing structures rather than achieve any significant reform agenda. The rhetoric of participation and empowerment at the school level, the Trojan horse from which school-based strategic planning is sold to schools and the wider community, comes with the condition of needing to deliver on systemic, read political, mandates and priorities. As such, the state through systemic authorities continue to set targets which trickle down, or it may be argued are forced, to the school level and in doing so define what is an 'effective school'. That is, through the legitimising of a particular model and the normalising effects of what makes a good school, the dominant group has shaped the ontological reality which it is focused on.

The state has decided what is a 'good school' and they have developed mechanisms, with funding streams attached, to keep schools focused on pursuing that goal. As noted by Gunter and Forrester (2010), any thought that educative decisions can be made within an educational space are omitted in favour of the intervention of the state in what is perceived as a crisis. This is problematic. Education is a contested terrain. Every aspect of educative practice is, and should be, contestable. The legitimising of a single way to do things, or the flawed notion of a singular 'best practice' needs to be challenged. There is always room for alternatives.

The argument here is not that school-based strategic planning is bad. Rather, the rhetoric that surrounds moves such as strategic planning specifically and more broadly, devolution, often obscure larger political moves at play. School leaders are embedded within discursive mechanisms which seek to normalise their behaviour. The new levels of professionalism and innovation that Caldwell and Spinks (1998) wrote of have not yet been reached. While not suggesting a simple causal effect should have been witnessed, instead I argue that school leaders need to assume their role as public intellectuals and contest policy moves in an intellectually sophisticated manner. While giving high school students laptops and building new halls may be politically popular moves (although that is always open to debate), what is missing is an intellectual debate about the educative value of policy moves. If the future knowledge, skills and attitudes for which school leaders are to plan for are merely the delivery of what business or the economy demands, then schools further subjectify themselves to the agenda of those beyond education. This thesis was argued by Callahan (1962) in the 1960s. Surely we have moved ahead in the last 50 years.

Conclusion

The impact of state control thinly disguised as empowerment may well tarnish the school-based strategic planning initiative. Rather than improving the quality of education in Australian schools and enhancing the capacity of Australian educators to shape the future of the country, structural reforms like school-based planning have increasingly looked to educational managers as conduits for

government manipulation. Schools are subjected to the paradox of decentralisation and yet the imposition of the 'what' and 'how to' strategically plan. Weiler (1990) argues that the state (and its various governance units) gains added legitimacy and/or political utility by appearing to be sensitive and responsive to democratic expression and local needs. The mass implementation of school-based strategic planning serves this political purpose. The devolution of planning, despite the centralised target setting, diffuses control throughout the system and provides additional layers of insulation between the state and individual schools. In short, the state remains somewhat invisibly in control of schools while school communities feel empowered to develop their own 'local' implementation plans.

Despite claims to the contrary, schools remain relatively stable organisations, as do the needs and wants of their primary stakeholders, parents. However, Wright (2001) argues:

> Leadership as the moral and value underpinning for the direction of schools is being removed from those who work there. It is now very substantially located at the political level where it is not available for contestation, modification or adjustment to local variation. (p. 280)

The analysis presented in this article has shown a glimpse of how school-level strategic planning practices that appear devolutionary may be in fact constitute forms of power and therefore result in more effective means of control. The language of empowerment and voice for stakeholders in the governance of schooling has gained prominence based on the idea that student learning is stifled by excessive bureaucracy; conservative, turf protecting teachers' unions; and out-of-touch reformers imposing ideas on schools from above (Anderson, 1998). After all, isn't it obvious that those closest to the action (teachers, students) and those with a stake (parents, community members, students) in the school should have a strong voice in decisions? If we are to fully embrace the market ideology, then market forces should reign supreme and the voice of the client should dictate future directions. School-based strategic planning has sought to address this perceived need to embrace local voice in shaping direction, yet done so in a manner that limits the degree of that shaping to localised implementation. Therefore, this devolutionary practice is not about challenging and critically reflecting on existing practices and purposes, but to incorporate schools into existing structures. As this case has shown, while the targets for schools continue to be set at the state and regional level, the rhetoric of devolving decision making and direction setting to the school level is set within the parameters of systemic control.

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