

THE MICRO-POLITICS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM: Teachers and Policy in NSW and England

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A paper presented to the Annual Australian Association For Research in Education conference
University of Sydney, 27th-30th November, 1990.

There are a number of critical parallels between contemporary English (Ball, 1990, Ball and Bowe, 1990) and Australian (Crump, Cocklin and Maley, 1990; Crump, Monfries and Berry, 1990) research into school community responses to political reforms imposed on the organisation of education in both countries. The best representation of these reforms is to be found in the legislation which empowered and legitimated their implementation: the "Education Reform Act 1988" [ERA] for England and Wales and the "Education Reform Act 1990 No.8" [ERB] for New South Wales [NSW], Australia. We coined the term 'research touchstone' to describe the international common ground shared between the research projects of the University of London [UL] team and University of Newcastle [UN] team. Both projects are investigating politically-driven educational reforms, particularly those related to school management. Our search for 'touchstone' is based on a view that the growth of knowledge is a problem-solving activity. The problems are those perceived by key decision makers and the solutions are the practices and coping strategies which depict a response to specific leadership problems. While there are clear differences between the various problem-solution repertoires under the spotlight of the UL and UN research projects, there are - perhaps surprisingly - many **shared** contexts and problem situations. These commonalities are the 'research touchstone' we wish to explore as one way to understanding the micro-politics of educational reform.

BACKGROUND

The NSW project began in 1989 as a pilot investigation for the Hunter Region (NSW) into decision-making by the first group of Leading Teachers [LT] appointed to secondary schools as one of the early concrete reforms of the recently-elected Liberal government. The UN project began as an ethnographic case study into the implementation of policy related to educational administration. The project expanded in 1990 to include broader research strategies built on initial findings and increased the sample to include the second wave of LT appointments in the Hunter. We are currently negotiating the participation in the project of the region's Cluster Directors [CD] appointed in April this year. The LT and CD positions were completely new management positions, the LT (Dr. Metherell's idea) within certain schools and the CD (Dr. Scott's idea) across a network of about 3 secondary schools as well as the relevant feeder primary schools. We judged this development to be worthy of research and accepted as a working hypothesis the government's expectation that fast-track promotion on merit would allow these people to become a different and, by inference, better educational leader than previous generations. Further, these people were viewed as a change agents sent on a mission to reverse the degenerating culture of many government secondary schools.

Leading Teachers are appointed with the salary and status equivalent to a Deputy Principal but are responsible for teaching classes, providing leadership in improved classroom techniques, school inservicing and professional development, development of probationary teachers and school-based curriculum development. There were 53 LTs appointed to schools in 1989, 50 in 1990 and 47 appointments are approved for 1991. Cluster Directors are responsible for a 'cluster' of about 16 schools and they are expected to spend about 70% of their time in schools providing educational leadership and supporting principals in promoting excellence, equity, quality and accountability in the schools' operation. They are also expected to assist with the management of financial and human resources, be available to speak to parent and community groups, and oversee regional and central policy implementation. In March 1990, 149 Cluster Directors were appointed and will eventually be located at an Educational Resource Centre which will provide local access to educational aids and be a shopfront for Departmental curriculum documents.

In addition to collecting qualitative data, the UN study focuses on self-reported socio-cognitive decision making processes of LTs in the micro-political context of their practice in managing change. We are attempting to understand how LTs, and now Cluster Directors, operate in new leadership positions in an environment which requires new leadership practices. We argue at the end of this paper that this process is mediated by the LTs and CDs sense of self, by the culture of their setting, and by the wider social and political contexts.

There are significant similarities between the research of the UN and UL projects. The University of London team is investigating four comprehensive secondary schools [called Flightpath, Parkside, Pankhurst and Overbury] in two LEAs [Westway and Riverway] in England which are in the process of implementing the Local Management of Schools, comparable to 'global budgeting' in NSW. Each school is being treated as a case study involving extensive ethnographic research strategies. Comparisons are made between cases to detect themes for extensive analysis. This project is an exemplar of policy ethnography, basing itself on the premise that policy implementation is highly problematic and is subject to mediation and recontextualisation. There is a significant degree of touchstone between the data collected in England and NSW, a touchstone which informs a sociology of policy as well as insights into the political context of decision making by key school-level personnel. J.C. Walker (1989) also argues that there is no point at which policy making stops and implementation begins, providing some reason to be positive about the 1990s. J.C. Walker is encouraged that:

the numerous reports on education are advocating conditions to provide incentives for teachers and educational administrators to be creative and enterprising. This in itself (...) concedes the point about organisations and their members being part of the solution as agents and contexts of action. (...) Now that the point is conceded we can ask that it be applied as widely as possible (Walker, J.C.: 11).

One would be 'making history from theory' if one simply read off negative effects of the ERA and ERB **without** collecting the type of empirical data achieved in the UL and UN projects. It is Ball's (1990) Politics and Policy Making which provides the first sophisticated theoretically-based **critique** of the construction and implementation of the E.R.A. based on Ball's (1987) seminal micro-political theory on school organisation. Ball (1990) suggests that the internal conflicts in what is a multi-interest organisation often mediate, in surprising ways, the projects of politicians and policy makers. It is **precisely** these processes which our complementary studies endeavour to investigate.

DATA TOUCHSTONE

In the final section of this shortened paper we wish to tease out a number of specific parallels in the data collected by the UL and UN teams. These parallels apply at a number of levels and we will present them in a sequence which tracks macro-systemic parallels through micro-political school levels to parallels between individual personnel. In doing this, we will indicate how the touchstone between England and NSW vividly illustrates shared perspectives, practices and concerns. The account is mainly descriptive at this stage as the UN project is two years behind the UL project as the ERB is two years behind the ERA. However, we are making a number of propositions which attest to the viability of the project and which provide food-for-thought for those, in Australia or England, currently engaged in doing what we are describing. The first parallel undoubtedly depicts an international issue.

1) Schools in NSW have not yet approached the extent of market-oriented decision-making as identified by the UL team at Flightpath where a number of pro-active strategies were promulgated in response to the directives of the ERA. These strategies included: setting up a Marketing Group; floating a private loan to build a school gymnasium with the loan partly offset by profits from a licensed bar; establishing an Academic Performance Group; participating in commercial advertising with a computer company; consulting a public relations firm to improve the school's image; offering private health insurance as a recruitment incentive; and seeking industrial sponsorship.

Yet the generation of this level of business ethos within school organisations is part and parcel of the NSW reform agenda. I have argued elsewhere (Crump, 1990) that this process is likely to engender

inappropriate values and increase internal conflict, a fear echoed by a senior teacher at Flightpath when he commented to the UL team:

I'm worried about this gap that is growing between teachers and teacher management (...) It is increasingly becoming a situation where a small group at the top, if you can use that phrase, are telling or encouraging, by any means they can employ (...) other people to actually do things. Now, as I understand it, schools are different to industry, I mean I have this egalitarian view, that the people I am trying to encourage to change, cajole are my equals. Yet in industry that isn't necessarily true. (Ball & Bowe, 1990, p. 27-28).

Mr Smith's view is not only egalitarian, it is also an empirical point: assistant and executive staff share similar professional qualifications, much more so than managers and workers in industry and business. The LT at Bridgetown (NSW) understood that there are different factors to take into account in the management of social organisations. S/he explained:

The least qualified person we have here is a graduate, a university person. You're not talking about an untrained, uninterested, uninformed workforce. You're talking about working with intelligent, professional people. (...) I think you have to believe that people are doing a good job and then find out that they aren't.

2) Underlying the economic imperative of our first parallel between the data of the UL and UN projects is an understanding that there is a difference between policy rhetoric and practice and that policy formation does not end with the legislative moment (Ball & Bowe, 1990). In the UN study, one LT suggested at a Staff Development Day on designing school-based action plans, that the staff take up the policy rhetoric to achieve their own ends: if the policy trumpets 'school-centred education', then power could be devolved to schools and teachers should seek every opportunity to turn that rhetoric into local action. In the UN project one LT wanted to use a general staff meeting to discuss the possibility of similar issues arising from the implementation of the Scott Report. S/he told us:

I wanted to talk to staff about the implications of [the Scott Report] if accepted. (...) [ask them] 'What are the implications for you as a classroom teacher?'. I was told 'No'. My principal did not want the Scott Report mentioned at all. I thought that was a shame. It is probably the most revolutionary document that teachers are going to come up against in the next three years. If they don't have time to talk about it, to (...) have an informed opinion, then I believe the idea of staff development and professional responsibility is just empty words. (...) My feeling is that the principal was reluctant because he wasn't confident enough to manage the comments - and there could have been a number of very negative comments (...) Now I don't think a professional body of people, if you treat them as responsible adults, will react like that. [LTaF1: 2/8/89] 'a' = 1989 appointment; F1 = name code; then date of interview]

The LT aimed to facilitate a mood for change, but the Scott Report itself was not the main impediment. One problem this example illustrates is the advanced age bracket of most leaders in the NSW government system which is the outcome of decades of promotion on "seniority" rather than merit. We suspect that LT's, and their equivalent in England, make rapid progress in learning about the relationship between implementing change and the social/political sub-cultures in their schools, or fail. Before exploring that dimension, we also detected an alternative "leader", one opposed to change.

3) The "maintainer" (don't rock the boat) administration role assumed by the principal of Pankhurst (UL project) offers a contrast to the roles played by LTs yet resembles the approach found in the senior administration of Lakeside in NSW. Interestingly, Pankhurst and Lakeside share similar socio-economic communities and a notably conservative staff. Lakeside serves a very middle class and affluent area. The LT noted:

My first impression of the school and the place (was that) we have got teachers here who have been teaching in excess of 25 years, very experienced staff, no first-year-out teachers. (...) So that's the nature of the place and once people get here they're very reluctant to leave. (...) [so] I tried to find areas [to change] that would be least threatening to the staff, areas which were obviously in need [of change] (...) and to steer clear of the more sensitive areas. (...) It turns out that I was wrong [laughs] and that all [original emphasis] matters were sensitive even if there was an acknowledged need. Moving in deeper to actually do anything in any area was viewed with grave suspicion by a lot of the staff. [LTaF3: 7/9/89]

While the LT at Lakeside was very aware of external forces and educational issues, s/he had trouble arousing a sense of commitment in the staff towards change. Some schools exist in a time-warp, banking on the expectation that policies and/or Ministers will change before they have to! While Dr Metherell is no longer responsible for the Education portfolio, Virginia Chadwick appears to be committed to the implementation of his policies before the next election (by mid-1991), while putting considerable effort into consensus building and reassurance work, a strategy also adopted by Kenneth Baker's successor (Ball, 1990, p.148). If the 'head in the sand' strategy has worked in the past, we doubt it will in the future as communities take a closer interest in their school, especially when they see neighbouring schools set up as technology centres, centres of excellence in specialist subject areas, and embarking on completely new ways of staffing and financing their institution.

4) Finally, as a cautionary note to our analysis, there is a sense of personal failure shadowing LTs and senior staff in the UL project. This sense of failure is one dynamic in the 'politics of career' (Ball, 1987). A member of the senior management team at Flightpath (UL project) observed:

I think the school is very much over-reacting. We keep shooting ourselves in the foot. It's a bit like Salvador Dali's paintings. We could do ourselves a lot of damage because we are creating a lot of our own stress. We've had people on the senior management team, you'll have spoken to them, who are really worried, they see it as their personal failing, their responsibility to actually make sure that these things happen (Ball & Bowe, 1990; p. 31)

The Principal at Flightpath expressed the following discontent with the pressures on everyone's time:

Once upon a time we used to have a paper brought to this body [the SMC] and then everything was dealt with. Now, we're so pressured to do forward planning and such like that we don't have time. That means people aren't trained to do those jobs and the basic things aren't being organised properly. (Ball & Bowe, 1990, p. 38).

In the UN project, the LTs in their second year suspect that they are not achieving the enormous task set for them by the role description. One part of the UN project was to explore the cognitive processes involved when a person is confronted with the idea or reality of possible evaluations by others and how people attempt to control the images they project to others (Monfries, 1990). Monfries notes that anxiety can arise when an individual perceives that s/he either can or will not make the desired impression and that this is more likely to occur when the motivation to create the desired impression is high (Monfries, 1990, 14-16) as in LTs and CDs who are, by the nature of merit selection, fast track promotion, and the public expectation as a "Super Teacher", a high flier. Monfries suspects that people who worry about performance tend to be perfectionists; however, a certain level of anxiety can facilitate performance while excessive levels impede performance. LTs in the UN project showed little fear of negative evaluation and the Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) scales suggest LTs maintain their high ideals irrespective of the judgments made by peers.

At Surfside, the UN team conducted extensive interviews with a number of staff nominated by the LT as "significant others", people with whom s/he had worked with in carrying out LT roles. All of these contacts reported an acceptance of the **person** as against acceptance of the actual roles of the LT position. They acknowledged that staff who had not worked with the LT were less positive and felt that

the 'Super Teacher' tag was a slight on their own competence. There was also a difference between the "significant others" and staff who had little professional contact with the LT in their perception of the LTs impact on the school: "significant others" felt that the LT had contributed to curriculum development, assisted faculty organisation, defined the school's goals and aims, and had done extra work in areas that had been neglected in the past and that the LT directed the staff's energies in a more efficient way thus easing the pressure and providing support and encouragement. They concluded that the LT received criticism because s/he was inducing change on a group of "staid teachers who don't like change". They concluded that the LTs main achievement was achieving improved morale and in maximising excellence in the educational setting.

Teachers in less direct contact with the LT resisted the changes introduced by the LT: they felt that s/he was just using the school as a stepping stone for fast-track promotion, that the LTs goals were brought in at the wrong time when they had too much to do already, and that s/he was really working towards personal goals, that s/he was not involved enough with the pupils, that the LT role was not all that relevant as a lot of the items addressed were really decisions an individual could make and that, as they had been in the school a long time, they do not need classroom supervision. Both groups in the school did agree that they did not want the LT to become a business manager and that financial responsibilities should go to the principal or to a bursar, someone with financial qualifications.

The LT at Surfside was not insensitive to the ambiguity of his position, acknowledging the hostility but viewing it as coming from people who still felt threatened by his role though not so much on a personal level. The LT at Lakeside was prepared for a more entrenched hostility:

The first day was fairly challenging (...). I very thoroughly prepared myself with some very amusing overheads which I hoped might break the ice (...) One of the overheads was a picture of a caped crusader with the stars and spangles, a woman of incredible qualities who had a cape. I had written across it "A Leading Teacher" and then underneath (...) "This is what I'm NOT". I started with that because the idea of a Super Teacher was very much in the minds of everybody at that time. I really thought that nobody could live up to the expectations that were being put on us and the sooner that was laid to rest the better. [LTaF3: 7/9/89]

Other LTs felt boxed in by the roles they were supposed to fulfil as it excluded them from management areas which require a quick fix and thus allowed them to demonstrate their abilities. The LT at Minesville felt the roles were too rigid and explained how the staff were very positive in their end-of-year evaluation but asked to see the LT play a role in student welfare. S/he explained:

It's amazing that they can ask me to help with a concern that they have with one of their students and I can do something about it almost instantly - the pay off is that when I ask them to be involved in something that's fairly long term (...) they participate willingly in staff development and curriculum development [LTaF1: 30/4/90]

The LT at Newton sensed how:

A deputy is accepted and really valued by the staff of a school because he has handled a particular thing, or a child, or in the playground, or with rolls - things like that pay off straight away. Our position doesn't allow us to do that. [LTaF2: 22/8/90].

The LT at Alberton observed how peer perceptions changed after s/he spent time as relieving principal:

I think my periods down there [in the principal's office] when we've had a few crises to manage - and the fact that I did manage them - certainly enhanced my standing in the eyes of my colleagues. I've shown that I can do that but my role is different and I keep stressing that the role isn't as consistently public. [LTbM3: 10/8/90].

Other coping strategies include playing for time. The LT at Surfside altered course a little at the beginning of 1990. S/he told us:

My view is that I've played a bit of a waiting game this term, just consolidating and doing the basic important planning within the school that had to be done. (...) My view about Term 1 was to consolidate, get the planning done at the school level to avoid the hiccups of last year. [LTaM1: 12/4/90].

Finally, the LT at Dalesville told us:

There are a lot of cynics out there who feel we've been shunted to a siding now that the initial after the initial flurry of development (...) and some Leading Teachers, many Leading Teachers, are feeling unwanted both by their schools and by the region. It's a very hard to do the job that they're doing let alone consider going further in the Department. There are some quite horrific stories about the way LTs have been treated particularly in schools but also in regions. [LTbM2: 30/7/90]

Our early data suggests that individual cognitive judgments of self-worth are translated by a change in employment status and through the micro-political interactions based in the management of reform. While a degree of 'fear of negative evaluation' is a component of the LT profile identified in the qualitative data, the quantitative data suggests that LTs are able to maintain high self-esteem. Leading a school through educational reform is a genuine micro-political minefield. It is a personal human experience which, for all the rhetoric, will only enable a change in the culture of schools if those conflicts and power struggles which do occur are ones worth winning. Otherwise, we risk falling morale among school leaders and that must be avoided if there is to be any change of deep, lasting, progressive reforms. LTs and CDs face an impossible task if a) they are not given the resources to be efficient managers as well as effective leaders, b) if the models they use are ambiguous and are not consistent with the practical context of organisational politics, and c) if, in bargaining and persuading their way through the micro-politics of their reform agenda, they contribute in ways which are more likely to promote stability rather than change. One option is to ensure that leadership styles, organisational structures and resources, communication procedures and policy decision making provides and maintains a school climate supportive of democratic practice.

(1) With the assistance of M. Monfries and V. Berry. In collaboration with Prof. S. Ball and R. Bowe, University of London. We wish to thank the Leading Teachers who have generously participated in this project. We thank Dr. T. Metherell, NSW Minister for Education and Youth Affairs (1987-90) for the interview and interest in our findings. We gratefully acknowledge a grant from the University of Newcastle Committee for Research in the Schools.

(2) For details on the theory and methodology, refer to CRUMP90.291 on the conference disk set.

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