

GAME, SET AND MATCH: BUREAUCRACY 1, SCHOOLS 0: TIME TO CHANGE THE RULES?

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Abstract

A scan of the organisational structures of government education departments in Australia and elsewhere suggests that they remain hierarchical, bloated and bureaucratic. This is despite school-based management (devolution) trends across the last decade or so that have proclaimed greater autonomy for schools and leaner, meaner supporting central and in some systems regional or district structures. This paper, however, argues that, in the main, the plethora of past reforms and restructures of education systems, schools and schooling has not resulted in much change for central bureaucracies at all. It could be argued that government schools are not self-managing but are highly regulated and controlled emanating from continuing corporate managerialism agendas involving enhanced accountability requirements. It suggests that if schools are to move to a 'new millennium' position to respond to a rapidly changing and challenging world, that a revolutionary leadership approach to change at the centre itself is needed, characterised by new mind-sets in educational leaders that fundamentally challenge and change the culture, the principles, the values and the power relationships in how education systems have been conceptualised and organised in the past. While not offering a recipe of solutions to the challenges it raises, the paper (a) identifies a set of fundamental principles that contrasts the current (traditional) and a possible future (revolutionary) state for bureaucracies for consideration and (b) proposes a research agenda that may stimulate a different way of thinking about education systems such that the teaching and learning of young people is the dominating driver of the strategy, structure and culture of such systems.

Introductory comments

One constant in most of the educational reforms and restructurings across the last two decades or so, particularly in large schooling systems, has been the central bureaucracy. Yet, over 40 years ago, Argyris (1962), looking at the impact of bureaucracies on people argued that the strategies adopted by managers were creating organisational and human decay. Despite some successful developments in recent times, many of the current strategies, structures and means of organisational delivery of schooling through large education systems are not much different from what they were like in the past. This is despite the myriad of changes most bureaucracies and schools have endured across these times.

While schools have been challenged to introduce many and varied new curricula, while teachers have been challenged to attain new and higher states of professionalism and while organisational and operational models for schools have demanded new and different ways of doing things at the actual delivery end of the service, the fundamental aspects of the central (and sometimes, regional or district) bureaucracy have remained essentially the same. While it is acknowledged that the bureaucracy has been subjected itself to almost constant reform across this time, it continues to retain its pre-eminence organisationally despite the fact that it is the schools who actually engage almost exclusively in the core business of the organisation, namely the delivery of educational services to young people. Limerick, Cunningham and Crowther (2002, pp. 83-88) describe many large government organisations as neo-corporate bureaucracies, characterised by the major paradigm of the hierarchical corporate organisation, with a focus on accountability while at the same time attempting to move a more devolved model of operation to be responsive to a discontinuously rapidly changing world. A question to be posed is: Are our current models the most appropriate for the challenges and changes of this millennium?

Earlier attempts to generate debate about such matters, (Cranston, 2002a; Cranston, 2002b) outlined some provocative ideas about these matters. Not surprisingly, the reaction ranged from some small interest among a few, to raised eyebrows from others to criticisms of a lack of a research basis for the arguments. This last reaction is addressed in part in this paper. In brief then, this paper sets out to:

- a) consider some of the issues and arguments of interest in considering the appropriateness of current bureaucratic models evident in many public education systems;
- b) identify some principles that might underpin a different way of operating; and,
- c) propose some ideas for a possible research agenda to begin to examine some of the matters discussed here.

Some background issues

Central to the arguments in this paper is a questioning as to whether commonly held conceptions of large education systems such as public sector bureaucracies, and the leadership of those systems, are appropriate for the delivery of educational services in these new times. Such questioning would not seem unreasonable as schools have been under challenge to do things differently, and better, in response to new centrally conceived policies for decades. Of course, whether there has been any real change in response has been viewed rather cynically by some, such as Caldwell (2001), who observed that "(e)ducation in Australia has been in a state of continuous change for several decades. ... There is a widely held view, however, that there has been much change but little reform" (p.1).

Questioning the status quo is not new. Educational (eg. Beare & Slaughter, 1993; Beare, 1995, 2001; Caldwell & Hayward, 1998; Caldwell & Spinks, 1998) as well as non-educational writers

(Clarke and Clegg, 1998; Limerick et al, 2002) have been arguing for a number of years for new ways of thinking about organisations (schools, school systems) and how they might be structured, organised and characterised. However, questions arise here as to whether Hargreaves' observation (1994) almost 10 years ago remains valid, namely that professional and institutional structures are resilient in so far as they withstand many an assault and have powerful capacities to maintain and reproduce themselves despite surface changes. Despite this, Beare (2001) contends that in the developing networked universe today, there is "simply no place for bureaucracy ... for bureaucracy belongs to the Industrial Revolution" (p. 60).

The new times referred to above reflect the rapid and discontinuous global changes impacting on education and schools and organisations in general – social, political, technological (Clarke & Clegg, 1998; Education Queensland, 1999; Power, 2000; Limerick et al, 2002). Even so, educational system structures remain characterised by a centre or central bureaucracy retaining, or endeavouring to retain, significant control over schools, often in what are structurally highly decentralised and complex systems. The centre (central office, head office, corporate office - whatever title is popular at the time) controls the education policy agenda, the centre controls major budgeting processes and the centre, in large part, dictates what schools should do (Soares & Soares, 2002). Many principals and teachers take up the myriad of new ideas tendered by the centre captured by the promises embedded in the policy rhetoric. Others are much less enthusiastic.

It could be argued that our typically large, essentially "conservative" bureaucracies (Parker & Bradley, 2000) are not in the best position to continue to make many decisions for those in schools dealing first-hand with the many complex challenges they face. The old mind-sets inherent in such organisations condition the nature of administration of the bureaucracy, establish prescribed arrangements under which people are employed, and generate a set of logics which justify bureaucratic practice (O'Faircheallaigh, Wanna & Weller, 1999, p. 74). Further, it might be questioned as to whether educational funding ought continue to be directed to supporting a central bureaucracy diverting potential extra resources away from schools. If change is to occur here, it will require more than fiddling with institutional structures and shuffling resources (Latham, 2001, p. 7). It will need to be focused on the principles underpinning the entire organisation. In fact, the values, ideals and possibly the very positions of those currently leading such organisations might need to be challenged if real change is to be effected (Sturges, 2000). These matters present as potentially significant barriers as are the prevailing assumptions, cultures and mind-sets of many of the current organisational leaders.

A closer look

Various iterations of school-based management/self governing school models seem to continue to retain interest across many large education systems (Bush & Gamage, 2001). However, there is perhaps not enough debate about the fundamental principles upon which the relationships between schools and the centre are based in such models, and how they manifest in practice. Limerick et al (p.85) suggest that such reforms ought be seen not as devolution but as "pseudo-devolution", whereby decision-making in schools for example, is not freed up and enhanced but is controlled by the centre. Even the language of pseudo-devolution assumes the centre "giving away" something to schools, ie. the centre is in the power position to be able to do this.

The essentially linear roll out of new ideas from the system centre (sometimes through districts, regions or other local education authorities) eventually to schools has been replicated over and over again. This approach reflects a lack of appreciation of the complexities of change processes (Kirkbride, Durcan & Obeng, 1994). The conduct of lengthy consultation processes with key

stakeholders, seemingly with the implication that the system is listening, does not hide the view of many that the centre has the answers even before asking the questions of the stakeholders! This model invariably presupposes that the central bureaucracy generates the 'new ideas and ways of doing things' and holds overall leadership for change. In so doing, the centre seems to secure its budget first, other secondary bureaucracies in the system secure their budgets second with the remainder distributed, usually by a complex formula, to schools last.

Anecdotal observation suggests that almost every new idea generated in the centre results in the establishment of another central office mini-bureaucracy to develop the idea, provide guidance for schools and oversee delivery in schools. Paradoxically, the overt accountabilities for the outcomes of such ideas, however, typically traverse the opposite route with implementation budgets often sapped by salaries and resources absorbed in the mini-bureaucracy.

Osborne and Gaebler (1993, p. 314) capture the situation thus:

Traditional public education is a classic example of a bureaucratic model. It is centralized, top-down and rule driven; each school is a monopoly; customers have little choice; and no one's job depends on their performance. It is a system that guarantees stability not change.

Further, Limerick et al sum-up the often unrecognised predicament in which many large education systems find themselves. That is, where despite the public rhetoric to the contrary, they argue that senior managers are not preparing their organisations for the challenges and contradictions of these new times. On the contrary, they are potentially ensuring that they are in fact significantly underprepared:

Many managers ... are plagued by problems of accountability and are reluctant to let go of the apparent certainty of hierarchical control. So they have developed an uneasy hybrid form of organisation in which hierarchy is retained but which attempts to implement some of the precepts of postcorporate organisation. The result is ... the neo (new) corporate bureaucracy, ... it is still based on the corporate mindset. (p. 22).

The challenge is to find sufficient space in these models to genuinely reflect notions of schools first, bureaucracies second or whether any radical alternatives to the status quo have been contemplated by key decision-makers, that is, those holding the power. Such alternatives might think about the system as not simply comprising a central bureaucracy, secondary bureaucracies (eg. regions) and schools as well-ordered and clearly structured elements of an organisation, but might adopt a much more realistic and potentially responsive model that sees the system as a loosely coupled networked organisations. That is, where the organisation is characterised by autonomous distinctiveness, interdependence and responsiveness where organisational units (eg. schools) and those 'bodies' external to the units (eg. wider community bodies and organisations) are responsive to each other and collaborate from time to time with each other (Limerick et al, p. 46).

In these organisations, power over gives way to power with and through, control over gives way to collaboration and sharing with, and sameness and conservatism give way to creativity and innovation. Such radical alternatives might be driven by notions of autonomy, synergies, alliances, and empowerment resulting in meaningful productive partnerships for school communities with far greater potential to develop responsive and effective solutions to emerging challenges than is possible through another policy developed at the centre with potentially only passing practical relevance to schools.

Almost a decade ago, Osborne and Gaebler (1993) argued for what were then, and perhaps still, radical alternatives involving the notion of community-owned government, or what might be described as the "insistence of ordinary citizens on having their say" (O'Faircheallaigh et al, 1999, p. 69). Using examples of successfully managed community service delivery activities they identified a number of useful notions to raise questions about the appropriate roles of central bureaucracies, school communities and wider communities in the schooling enterprise. They include concepts such as (p. 66-70):

- ?? Communities have more commitment to their members than central bureaucracies have to their clients;
- ?? Communities understand their problems better than the bureaucracy;
- ?? Communities are more flexible and creative than large service bureaucracies;
- ?? Communities are cheaper than bureaucrats, leaving more dollars for actual service delivery.

In short, these concepts suggest schools ought be more highly 'connected' with their communities than with their organisational centre. How much uptake has there been with such community-driven notions? What, for example, can we learn from the charter schools in the United States that have addressed some of these community-driven agendas (Botsman, 2001)? How might some of the most successful ideas from these initiatives be translated to say an Australian context? If progress is only incremental, as might be expected, is it that Osborne and Gaebler are wrong? Or do such ideas challenge fundamentally the prevailing principles, mind-sets and culture upon which our current systems are constituted and thus provide enormous challenges for implementation. It might be that implementation of such ideas results in those currently in positions of power needing to contemplate alternative futures in which they may play a much lesser, or in some cases, no part.

Changing the rules

If we accept that there is room to debate change to the current way of doing things, what might be some of the underpinning principles requiring consideration? How do they compare with what exists now, in terms of principles and practices for leadership and culture, policy issues, centre-school relationships, budgeting and funding, and resourcing and accountability. The table below summarises some thoughts in this regard. Contrasted is 'how we do it now' (*traditional*) with how we might do it from an alternative (*revolutionary*) perspective. [In the table on the next page, the 'centre' refers to the central bureaucracy, for example the central office and possibly secondary bureaucracies, such as district offices.]

Traditional	Revolutionary
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Leadership & culture

?? status quo valued and influences future	?? only successes from the now and past retained
?? teachers' attitudes and values determine what constitute a 'good student'	?? school community attitudes and values determine what is best for all their students
?? centre drives leadership throughout the system	?? leadership focus in school and wider communities holds priority, with multiple (shared) leadership encouraged
?? criticism by school communities of centrally developed policies strongly discouraged	?? vigorous debate of all policies, particularly by those implementing same, encouraged and valued
?? promotion is the reward of those who 'look' and 'sound' like their superiors	?? difference and diversity in thinking, attitudes and ideas are valued and rewarded
?? gender, 'old boys clubs', favours, like mindedness and old mind-sets characterise the culture	?? quality, intellect, leadership, challenge, forward thinking and new mind- sets pervade the culture
?? radical ideas that depart from past practices discouraged	?? radical ideas that depart from past practices that improve student learning sought and acted upon

Policy

?? centre engages in multi-level policy development which generate a plethora of priorities for schools to implement	?? centre engages in strategic policy development around government and essential priorities only; local school community developed policies responding to students' needs take precedence
?? schools follow the centre's policies	?? schools challenge the centre's policies if they are inappropriate for their community
?? centre interferes in operational matters of schools	?? school communities determine all operational matters that affect them
?? significant policy lag in conception (at the centre) and implementation (in schools)	?? more rapid implementation of policy priorities as school communities are significant players in policy process
?? centre's policies often assume a 'one-size-fits-all' approach	?? every school community has its differences which must be accommodated in policy development

Centre-school relationships

?? centre has a life of their own; it could exist and operate without schools	?? centre exists only if it can demonstrate that it value-adds to the work of schools
?? centre is the source of innovative ideas	?? innovative ideas are welcomed and supported from everywhere, especially schools and their communities
?? centre points the accountability 'finger' at schools while retaining control over critical resourcing matters	?? schools hold clear accountabilities for student outcomes, because they have control over the resources that matter
?? centrally determined policies 'solve' social justice and equity challenges	?? community determined social justice and equity priorities are embraced and funded
?? centre proclaims to hold accountabilities for public funding of schools	?? communities hold accountability for public funding of schools
?? centre determines accountability responsibilities	?? school communities in collaboration with the centre determine appropriate accountabilities

⚡⚡ Budgeting & funding

?? centre proscribes a top-down approach to budgeting	?? bottom-up global approach to budgeting is adopted system-wide
?? centre is funded first; funding for schools with what is left	?? schools are funded first; funding for the bureaucracy follows, if, and as, it is needed

⚡⚡ Resourcing & accountability

?? centre, in response to political pressures, supports the continued operation of inefficient and ineffective schools	?? communities determine the on-going viability and operation of schools
?? centre holds overall control for critical resources, such as human resources	?? schools (individual and clusters) hold control (and accountability) for their human resources
?? centre senior bureaucrats attract premium salaries	?? principals, other school administrators, senior teachers attract premium salaries
?? human resources (staffing) characterised by tenure	?? human resources characterised by performance and quality

Can we shift from the 'traditional' to the 'revolutionary'?

The first and major issue to be addressed in any such shift from 'traditional' to 'revolutionary' are the mind-sets of those who currently hold and exercise power in the central bureaucracy. The proposed changes outlined here present as potentially fundamental challenge to their exiting positions, authority and their futures. The mind-set changes transcend cultural and operational changes. Many senior bureaucrats have attained their current positions because of their commitment and dedication (and in some cases even excellence) to the way things have been, and still are, done in their organisation. Typically they have been rewarded, via promotion for example, for accepting the 'traditional' approach with greater power and influence over policy, decision-making and resourcing in their system. As a result, whether the required changes in mind-set are possible with incumbent central office personnel then, may be highly problematic. Sturgess (2000) alerts us to the magnitude of seeking such radical change in the bureaucracy, noting that it survives because it delivers and that its identified weaknesses on one hand are the very things that give it strength on the other (p. 11). It might be that 'new faces' will be needed to bring the new mind-sets if the challenges of change are not understood by current senior officers.

Importantly, shifting from the 'traditional' to the 'revolutionary' also implies significant challenges for those in educational leadership positions in schools. That is, change will be required of principals, other school leaders, teachers and those in school communities and the wider community if the ideas of the 'revolutionary' are to be heard. This flow-on effect will result, for example, from changes in their roles and responsibilities as those of central office colleagues change. The "maternal" centre of the bureaucracy may in fact no longer be there!

There is clearly no easy path from the 'traditional' to the 'revolutionary'. In fact, many potentially significant and unresolved tensions can be identified as arising from any such attempts at change. (Cranston, 2000a, p. 66-67)

A research agenda

Development of a research agenda offers the potential to examine some of the matters raised here. While the possible research foci noted are exploratory and not well developed at this stage, they should be of interest for those concerned with the delivery of education services by large systems in these challenging and changing times.

The principles identified in the table above could provide a useful starting point. For example, research could examine how education systems are placed, say using a profile approach, with respect to the *traditional v revolutionary* principles - leadership and culture, policy, centre-school relationships, budgeting and funding, resourcing and accountability. The perspectives of various individuals and groups throughout the organisation might be sought to look at these. Alignments and lack of alignments could be identified, and debate initiated around similarities as well differences.

For example, aspects of the culture could be examined with respect to whether it is characterised by innovation/creativity/learning as opposed to sameness/conservatism/past practice. This might also provide useful data with respect to whether elements of a learning organisation are evident.

Of great interest would be an examination into aspects of the centre-school relationship, particularly in so far as they relate to such issues as (i) power (ii) ideas generation and relevance of these for schools and (iii) accountability – nature, location and implications of these.

An array of other research clusters could be developed from the principles listed. Other questions might include:

- ?? What do principals see as their major barriers (as well as facilitating features, factors) of the bureaucracy to the operation of their schools and the achievement of quality student learning? What alternatives might there be to minimise such barriers?
- ?? Can “value-added” measures be developed for the bureaucracy to demonstrate what contribution the bureaucracy makes to actual delivery of educational services by schools and the learning in those schools? Could such measures be used to hold the bureaucracy accountable for their roles and actions?
- ?? What is the allocation” of funding across the centre and schools for innovations, say? How much is “lost” to the bureaucracy across the planning and implementation phases? Is this appropriate? Are there other ways of doing it to maximise the dollars available in schools for students?
- ?? What alternative resourcing models, human and physical, (perhaps from the independent schooling sector) might be trialled in government schools to free up and enhance decision-making in schools to better address local student and community needs?

Perhaps for every new policy or innovation proposed by the centre for implementation by schools the following questions might be considered from a research perspective:

- ?? What are the fundamental principles and values underpinning the changes? Is there agreement regarding these among policy makers, key stakeholders, practitioners and relevant others? Are they consistent with organisational values, are they really about the learning of young people.
- ?? Is there wider and local school community interest in, and genuine commitment to the proposed changes - that is, have the changes been driven by a perceived need by students, practitioners, parents, wider community at the site of delivery of education, viz. schools? Are they about real educational need?
- ?? Whose interests (students?) will be served by the changes - can this be demonstrated?
- ?? Who will really hold the accountability for achieving the goals of the change? Are these clear?

- ?? Where will the dollars funding the changes really be spent, viz. in schools for students or will considerable monies be lost in bureaucratic machinations?
- ?? Are the changes fundamental shifts in thinking and pedagogy for example, or are they in reality nothing more than a re-badging of current or earlier practices?

The potential research agenda here is vast. It might be a measure of the bureaucracy as to whether such questions as posed above enter the discourse of the bureaucracy.

Concluding comments

The complexities and magnitude of the challenges facing education systems today are enormous if schools are to be positioned to respond adequately to a discontinuously changing globalised world. These challenges affect everyone and every part of the system, from the teacher to the director-general, from the school to the system's centre. This paper has endeavoured, perhaps rather simplistically, to look at how large education systems "do business" now and how those principles and practices might be challenged. For example, can we contemplate a time when schools no longer "belong" to bureaucratically ordered systems but rather may be loosely coupled with other community organisations both local and international with leaders emerging with a variety of backgrounds and experiences? If writers such as Beare (2001) are correct then we must start to think and act differently as "(i)n the new world order, big government instrumentalities (like education departments) and big hierarchically bound schools are in the process of unravelling" (p. 29). Perhaps it is time to strive for a "bureaucracy-free zone" (Schmerler, 2002, p.370).

Perhaps some of the ideas emerging from the literature that addresses changes in government, bureaucracy and community and the relationships among these for new times (see for example, Considine & Painter, 1997; Botsman & Latham, 2001; Mawson, 2001; Vigoda, 2002) might make a worthy contribution in debating these new mind-set and strategic changes. Contrasting what education bureaucracies are like now with the notions of Limerick et al's (2002) Fourth Blueprint or Senge's (1990) learning organisation might be a worthy research endeavour. Certainly research might go some way to "quantifying" what we have now, and what and where we might go in the future.

Democracies require that elected governments retain the overall responsibility (and accountability) for major policies through expenditure of taxpayers dollars and support or otherwise of their decisions at the ballot box. However, the fundamental assumption that the current way of doing things is the best or only way for implementation of those policies is rarely questioned. Is it not a time for some vigorous debates about what changes in thinking and practice might need to be made and how to drive those changes? Current notions of 'how it is done' and 'how it has been done' may need to give way to radically different alternatives to address the social, economic and technological challenges that place schools at the vanguard of what education systems ought really be about.

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