

School-community engagement: Shifting boundaries of policy and practice

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Abstract

This paper examines approaches to school-community engagement in policy and practice and argues for a reorientation toward equity beyond the neoliberal rationale. Over two decades neoliberal policies in Australia (and elsewhere) have perversely erased the boundaries of schools and communities as both have been incorporated into markets with business-based systems of performance and accountability. Within the context of a broad social inclusion agenda for 'raising standards' and 'closing gaps', educational disadvantage is reconfigured as underperformance and public understandings of equity are narrowly redefined in terms of performance on standardised tests. Locally and internationally, parental involvement and community partnerships for improving students' and schools' performance have been emphasised in recent educational policy as means to educational and social equity. Situated within this 'achievement turn' and associated teacher and school accountabilities, the relationship of schools and communities is disconnected from persistent structural problems of poverty, dispossession and the dismantling or diminution of many 'public' resources.

Drawing on local and international research, the paper proposes new approaches to school-community engagement that are concerned with social and cultural goals that are outside a neoliberal rationality. It is argued that community development approaches to school-community engagement open up possibilities for redressing inequities in and out of schools. The community development approach draws on social justice commitments of educators and community workers for collaboration in social action and the building of new social movements, emphasising the quality of relationships, learning in community contexts and strengthening innovation toward social change. Taking time is also necessary – time for critical engagement with the complexity of 'achievement gaps' and for improving the quality of life and learning in schools and communities. Thus reconfiguring school-community engagement requires new forms of accountability that relate to quality education and the quality of school-community collaboration.

Key Words

School-Community Engagement; Equity; Community development

Introduction

This paper examines approaches to school-community engagement in educational policy, research and practice and suggests that the disentanglement of school-community engagement initiatives from 'achievement' imperatives is crucial. In this analysis, we traverse the boundaries of schools and communities, recognising the continuities of educational and social policy and educational and social equity, to argue for shifts in the boundaries of policy and practice.

The relations of schools, families and communities have long been recognised in the scholarship of education as significant to patterns of educational success and social opportunities. In accounts of persistent patterns of educational disadvantage, the boundaries of schools and communities have been problematised, albeit with different emphases. For example, some stress the lack of fit of institutional and pedagogical practices in schools with community and cultural norms, whereas others emphasise the significance of students' 'backgrounds' including the socioeconomic and cultural influences of neighbourhoods and local communities (Comber, 1998; Lareau, 2003; Thomson, 2002). Similarly, the effects of the broader 'community' or societal context on educational experience are referred to in these accounts in a range of ways - in terms of social structure, hegemonic processes, policy and politics in which local school-community relations are negotiated (also Apple, 1990; Connell et al., 1982). What is clear is that the everyday relations of schools, families and communities are articulated as significant processes of social reproduction and, potentially, of social change (Anyon, 2005; Collins, 2009; Smyth et al., 2009).

Education policy in Australia, as elsewhere, has recently re-discovered 'community' as an important plank in educational policy reform. This is a 're-discovery' as educators taking a social justice standpoint have long argued for closer school-community links as a way of contributing to the redress of educational and social inequity. Current educational policy focused on school-community links is, we suggest, concerned with a fundamentally different agenda. We argue in this paper that school-community as a policy strategy must be understood as situated within an 'achievement turn' (Bottrell & Goodwin, 2011) in educational and social policy, which is centred on neoliberal principles. In this context, educational and social equity is narrowly defined and as a result school-community strategy becomes disconnected from engagement with persistent structural problems – indeed school-community initiatives may be implicated in reproducing structural inequalities. Drawing on local and international research, we propose a way of disentangling school-community engagement from the achievement turn in order to focus on social and cultural goals that are outside a neoliberal rationality. In short, we argue for community development approaches to school-community engagement as a way of opening up possibilities for redressing inequities in and out of schools.

The 'achievement turn' in schools and communities

Over two decades neoliberal policies in Australia (and elsewhere) have perversely erased the boundaries of schools and communities as schools have been incorporated into markets and as citizens have been repositioned as consumers. A highly differentiated school choice landscape has replaced post-war commitments to educational equity centred on the model of free comprehensive state schooling. Middle class families' choice of non-government or selective government schools for securing their position and ensuring their children's future success has been encouraged by political and media discourses on problems in public schooling, including attacks on public school

teachers; and patterns of funding that have supported increased non-government school diversity (Campbell, Proctor & Sherington, 2009; Connell, 2006; Marginson, 1997; Smyth, 2010). The residualising effects on disadvantaged public schools have reinscribed distinctions and the imperative of competition within and between systems (Bonner & Caro, 2007; Campbell, 2005). Most recently, educational policy has called for parental and community scrutiny of schools' results on national standardised tests as a means of informing school choice and/or exerting pressure on schools represented as not up to standard.

The "achievement turn" (Bottrell & Goodwin, 2011) in educational and social policy recasts educational and social inequities as the problems of failing individuals, families, schools and communities; and disadvantage in and out of school is thus reconfigured as underperformance. Individuals and families who are understood within policy discourse to lack opportunity, aspiration, skills and the discipline and capacity to make good choices are exhorted and coerced to take responsibility for their own destiny. For example, entitled welfare support has been replaced by workfare, mutual obligation and the demonization of "welfare dependency" (Ingamells, 2007). This recasting of inequity in policy and public perception lies within a larger shift in social identities towards individualisation - what Beck and Beck-Gersheim refer to as "a decline of narratives of assumed sociability" (2002, p. xxiii) - causing young people and families to see difficulties and exclusions they face as "as personal failings rather than 'problems of the system'" (Ball, Maguire & Macrae, 2000, p. 145). A key consequence of placing all responsibility and blame on individuals rather than systems is that it removes any perceived need to change the system (Anyon, 2005).

State provided or sponsored community programs and services now involve conditional and compelled support to families whose individualised social problems place them "at risk" or are associated with social exclusion. As the private consumption of "public" goods such as education and health have come to signify normative "participation", inequities manifest in social and geographic patterns of exclusion have been articulated as the problems of individuals and communities. Improving the effectiveness of parenting and raising parental aspirations are central features of interventionist social policy targeting the poorest communities. Responsibilisation strategies are also particularly evident in accountabilities imposed on schools and community agencies. In the incorporation of schools and communities into markets, managerial systems of performance and accountability have become entrenched. Schools and human services are required to optimise efficiencies of "inputs" and "outputs" by "targeting" and "personalising" programs to low achievers and through "intelligent" data production and management to "add value" or build capacity and continually improve their own and their clients' performance.

Thus, in the economic makeover of educational and social policy, the twin strategies of "raising standards" and "closing the gap" have replaced social justice principles that underlined the need

for changes at the level of institutions, systems, or structures to address disadvantage and marginality. Instead, the focus is on raising “performance” levels. In short, it disconnects the problems of economic and social exclusion from persistent structural problems of poverty, dispossession and the withdrawal, diminution or privatisation of many “public” resources.

The achievement turn and school-community engagement

The turn to school-community engagement in educational policy in Australia and internationally is posited as a means to educational and social equity. However, we suggest that the transformative potential of school-community partnerships is narrowly directed toward improved performance and school compliance with policy initiatives, potentially leading to superficial engagement with parents and community, designed to “tick the box” rather than initiate long-lasting reciprocal relationships. As documented in international research, the new pressure of accountabilities for performance, evident in emphasis on standardised tests and improved national performance in international league tables, has distorted school efforts toward redress of disadvantage. In many of the poorest schools in the United States and the United Kingdom, the focus on basic skills has renewed teacher-centred pedagogy in which young people are passive recipients rather than actively engaged in learning. Moreover, the preoccupation with test scores has resulted in the narrowing and fragmentation of curriculum and its scheduling around test preparation (Hursh, 2005; Nichols & Berliner, 2005). While some expansiveness such as the integration of literacy instruction across the curriculum has occurred in some schools, contractive practices predominate (Au, 2007) and elicit new “gatekeeping” strategies such as the reassignment of “underachievers” to special education classes exempt from testing (Jacob, 2005), the targeting of “borderline” students who may raise the school standard with additional support (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Thomson, Hall & Jones, 2010) and increased exclusion of less promising candidates (Rustique-Forrester, 2005). Additional “unintended consequences” have included the manipulation of accountability systems in order to secure funding and/or competitive status (Lee, 2010; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008).

In this context, the policy strategy of school-community partnerships, coupled with the increased competitiveness of schooling that places parents in the roles of “clients” and “consumers” has led to a narrowing of perceptions around school-community relationships. Research has found that, for many schools and teachers, “community” has become synonymous with “parents” (Freebody, Freebody, & Maney 2011a). As key stakeholders in an increasingly competitive education landscape, and in response to a political push for increased test results, parents have become the main, and often only, target group for schools’ engagement beyond the school gate. School-community engagement thus predominantly translates to greater parental participation in their children’s education, reoriented to addressing the “achievement gap”.

While there is general agreement in the literature that parental involvement in school and at home can improve academic achievement (Epstein, 2011) and that parental (typically mothers') involvement is strengthened by schools' attention to communication, encouragement of parents and outreach programs, achievement gains and broader benefits are associated predominantly with high socioeconomic families (Evanthia et al, 2005; Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Marschall, 2006). In addition, such initiatives are less frequently found in low socioeconomic areas. If this is the case, it may be that parental involvement strategies may be increasing achievement gaps, rather than reducing them. However, our point here is that while there remains a need for research in this area, narrowing the scope to a focus on achievement outcomes and changing parents' behaviour to raise standards may limit attention to other significant purposes and supports to parental involvement. These purposes might include, for example, teachers broadening their family communication repertoires, the development of reciprocally respectful relationships between school personnel and families and strengthening mutual commitment to students' education (Boethel, 2003). These are the kinds of goals, we suggest, that while "outside a neoliberal rationality" are significant in a broader social justice approach to school-community engagement.

Many of the dominant policy models for school-community initiatives can be understood as hampered by narrow performance and achievement frameworks. The narrowing of potential school-community engagement may also serve to focus the relationship on the achievements of individual students. This model of engagement not only leads to a more restricted time span, as parents tend to be involved only while their children are at school, but may lead to more "client-driven" understandings of school-community relationship; how "community" (i.e. parents) can help "the school" (i.e. their own children). Similarly, in school-community engagement through school vocational programs, service learning, enriching excursions and participation in festive events and fundraising (Sanders, 2002), the focus is on obtaining community support for the schools' aims. While schools are also made available as community facilities, for instance for community education, and principals and teachers in some disadvantaged areas regularly participate in community interagencies, there is little research on how community engagement informs teaching, school or community agency practices. Moreover, in the limited role of communities *in* schools there is little emphasis on engagement for enhancing teaching, curriculum or changing school structures (Mattingly, 2002; Hayes & Chodkiewicz, 2006). In addition, while research on "place-based learning" provides exemplars of environmental and community action projects, this model has been mainly limited to rural areas where schools play a more focal role as community amenity and the school gate does not denote a strong demarcation of teacher/student-citizen public/private roles (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008).

In "community" or "full-service" schools, the partnership or co-location of children's services, parent education and before and after school programs has made services more accessible in

disadvantaged communities. These models are premised on recognition that schools alone or services alone cannot meet the complex needs of students and their families living in poor socioeconomic circumstances. However, the level of family engagement has been variable and commonly dependent on the level of disadvantage experienced, costs involved and the communication and trust between schools and families (Cummings et al., 2010). Moreover, the accountability focus on services supporting individualised educational attainment and normative family development has meant that schools and communities in these models frequently maintain their boundaries despite physical proximity. In a UK study of schools' roles in area regeneration, Cummings and Dyson (2007) found that the "standards agenda" dominating local area educational priorities conflicted with policy on school-community engagement. This policy incoherence detracted from schools' capacity to collaborate with community agencies and any initiatives were generally ameliorative with limited educational or social impact. Cummings and Dyson conclude that profound area problems require long-term multi-agency efforts facilitated by clear policy guidelines and essential funding resources.

In educational policy, the role of parents and community in improving student and school performance parallels the policy strategy of building social networks in the community sector where the functional aim of support to families does little to alter the adverse conditions in which "their" problems are situated. In the context of the achievement turn, the value of community is made instrumental. Narrowing approaches to school-community engagement readily reinscribes Indigenous, low socioeconomic status and minority students and their families in terms of problematic backgrounds, increasingly depicted as underachievers and "outsiders who need to assimilate to be successful" (Swartz, 2009, p. 1067).

A community development approach to school-community engagement

Re-positioning school-community engagement as community development may shift the imperative for school-community links away from "achievement", defined narrowly, and toward broader social change objectives. According to Dixon (2003, p. 5) "community work" refers to "the conscious application of principles, strategies and skills to build and maintain a sense of community, both as an end in itself and as a vehicle to achieve social, economic, political and cultural change". In essence, in community development approaches, process is emphasised over product. A community development approach is explicitly participatory, and involves building the capacities of community members to express and address challenges facing their communities: in terms of education these challenges may just as likely be an "unwelcoming" school as poor results on standardised tests. Similarly, educational challenges may be defined by communities in terms of issues well beyond the school: the local economic and employment context, overarching racial and cultural relationships; the design of the local environment or access to necessary infrastructure.

The ideal of community as a foundation for policy making and service provision is not new. It took hold on the Australian political landscape in the late 1960s and 1970s, when new social movements emerged claiming not just the redistribution of social resources, but the democratisation of state institutions and practices to bring them under more direct popular control. “Community development” involved instigating “bottom-up” processes of change and action that enabled people to have a say in decisions that affected their lives in ways that emphasised participation, mutual support, collective action, and the demand for resources (Fawcett et al, 2010). Yet previous waves of community development had little purchase on the ways in which schools are organised or education policy was developed. The more recent “rediscovery” of community by policy makers may provide opportunities to reinsert some of these principles into the school reform agenda.

For example, a key development in contemporary conceptual approaches to community development has been a shift to talk of community “assets” or strengths. The asset or strengths based approach to community development can be contrasted with traditional models of community development that emphasise needs and gaps - or deficits – which have inevitably resulted in communities becoming reliant on “help” from the outside. In contrast, community development frameworks premised on identifying the strengths or assets, provide an alternative to the deficit positioning of some schools, students, families and communities in neoliberal policy and interrupts the policy and practice fixation on “evidence” of underachievement or pathology.

Emergent school-community collaborations provide concrete examples of community development work being undertaken with and through schools. The community organizing approach focuses, for example, on facilitating the leadership capacities of local parents or students to become more active decision-makers in the community. These capacities are understood not only in terms of the school community, but in terms of leadership in the broader community. Similarly, projects and practices aimed at developing schools as community centres involves developing schools as institutional partners in local service provision “not just to create add-on service, but to use the services as a starting point for building relationships with the school and the wider community” (Warren, 2007, p. 18). Approaches centred on the development of alternative schools – or ‘community schools’ - have as part of their mission reaching out into the community in order to actively break down segregations and exclusions (te Riele, 2011; Hayes, 2011) and thus also provide new models of practice for policy. Finally, community development approaches to school-community engagement can be harnessed in the development of new social movements.

Building of new social movements through school-community engagement

There is a call from educators, social workers, and activists for those with a social justice agenda working in community sectors, to develop broader interpretations of the work they do and to consider the need for social movements that emerge from the “urgent realities” of communities, families and students (Anyon, 2005, p. 199). This broader view of social movements looks beyond education reform to the bigger picture of employment, housing, transport, services and schools. Anyon argues that educational institutions can and should be at the centre of building new social movements. Schools, particularly in the neoliberal agenda, are depended on by governments and corporate elites to “deflect the pain inflicted by the economy” (Anyon 2005, p. 199) by working as agents of social control, concerned with the reproduction and justification of social disadvantage (Anyon 2005; Connell et al., 1982). Despite this, many education systems are founded on principles of liberalism and egalitarianism and there is a strong tradition among educators of critical pedagogy, social justice and schooling for social change (Friere, 1970; hooks, 1994; Fine & Weis, 2003; Smyth et al., 2009).

Informed by this rich history of social justice and advocating for young people, schools can build social movements through genuine and reciprocal community-school relationships. Schools are in a unique position to instigate movement building as principals and teachers have continual access to young people and their parents, are recognised public spaces (in some rural communities the main or only public spaces available), and most importantly, schools are “institutions whose basic problems are caused by, and whose basic problems reveal, the other crises in cities: poverty, joblessness, low-wages, and racial and class segregation” (Anyon 2005, p. 177). This allows schools genuine opportunities to develop powerful grass-roots development through school-community relationships that look beyond state or national policy, student “achievement” or neoliberal agenda of individualisation.

Activists claim that people do not get involved in politics through reading and learning about them, but through participation in politics. Research into school-community relationships suggests similar findings (Freebody et al., 2011b; Gonzales, Moll & Amanti, 2005). When schools and communities understand and participate in each others’ agendas, reciprocal relationships are built that have the potential to benefit all those involved and often other community members indirectly. The development of such relationships, however, can be difficult to build and foster. Educators from the US discuss the potential problems associated with the “stereotype threat” (Mendoza-Denton 2008; Steele 2003), where young people, particularly those belonging to minority cultures, fear the stereotype White, Middle Class culture has of them, is correct. This fear can prevent young people engaging fully in education. Beyond classroom participation, this stereotype fear can also lead to parents and community members opting not to engage in school-community relationships, believing they have nothing appropriate to offer. This is particularly the case for community members who did not have successful or positive school experiences. Time is another central

factor in the building of positive school-community relationships. Lack of time, and the perception of community engagement as something additional to, rather than at the centre of, work in schools prevents deep engagement with community issues beyond “tick the box” narrowly defined, policy-driven involvement schools are accountable for demonstrating. While opportunities exist within this policy-driven shift to engage schools and communities, adequate time and resources are needed for schools and teachers to research the particular needs and concerns of the community, develop a repertoire of innovative school-community practices, and work from the ground up to build social movements that have positive and lasting benefits for schools and communities.

A word of caution: the neoliberalisation of community

Neoliberal governance has required ongoing “boundary adjustments” (Tickell & Peck, 2003, p. 166) as the co-dependence of state and capital have been (and continue to be) negotiated in the context of local and global economic flows. From the late 1980’s in Australia, the “rollback” of the state, that has enabled market forces, privatisation of public assets and services and public-private partnerships as efficient means of promoting economic growth has nonetheless involved highly interventionist state regulation and re-regulation of social and cultural domains, or “rollout neoliberalism” (Ibid.). The recent adoption of social inclusion policy represents both the continuing neoliberal drive for developing human capital, productivity and national competitiveness within global markets and the need to reach into particular communities that have been marginalised from economic and social opportunities. Increasing “participation” is primarily concerned with economic inclusion and promoting the ideals of neoliberal subjecthood as enterprising and self-sufficient.

“Boundary adjustments” in state and citizen responsibility have centralised the strategic role of “community” which is assigned responsibility for the integration of its marginal members into projects of social cohesion, reciprocity, social capital, capacity building, community engagement, community renewal and social enterprise (Craig, 2007). Community development, traditionally based on principles of social justice and individual and community self-determination, is thus appropriated in social inclusion policy in the service of neoliberalism. As Rose (2000, p. 1400) has argued, “it is the language of community that is used to identify a territory between the authority of the state, the free and amoral exchange of the market, and the liberty of the autonomous, rights-bearing individual”. Thus communitarianism merges with neoliberalism in “third way” social democracies and in this context, “autonomous individuals can be governed through community” (Ibid., p. 1399).

Conclusion

In addition, the community development model challenges the segregation of schools from communities and the separation of learning in school from the rest of life (Bottrell & Goodwin,

2011). If the aim of school-community engagement is to build capacities ‘from the inside out’ and ‘from the bottom up’ then children, young people, parents, teachers, community agencies and policymakers must all be positioned as active citizens, capable and willing to participate in the shaping of their schools and their communities. Embracing such an approach, however, “calls forth some idealism and requires considerable efforts to make such a shift practicable. But it may be valuable means of translating social justice principles into practice and providing young people opportunities to shape the future, to shape their communities and their future” (Bottrell & Goodwin, 2011, p. 34).

Lack of school resources and time are principle barriers identified in research on school-community engagement. In the context of increasing focus on “raising standards” and “closing gaps”, the accountabilities foisted on schools and the community sector, such engagement is more likely to be perceived as “extra” tasks and not “core business”. The achievement turn produces school practices that are internally focused, intensified by the demands of data management, individualised programming and documentation for external audit. The prospect of dedicating time to forming authentic partnerships focused on school and community change may well appear to teachers, parents and community development workers to be just another top-down requirement that adds to their burden. However, there are alternative perspectives and emerging practices that recognise “the role that parents and communities might play in easing the burden of schooling and actively supporting teachers and schools” (Hayes & Chodkiewicz, 2006, p. 16). A community development approach may strengthen school support and direct school-community engagement toward redress of social inequities (Gale & Densmore, 2003).

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