Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Canberra, 1983
Australian Association for Research in Education

The Pre-emption of Social Priorities - Policy, Planning, and the Exclusionary Process

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Abstract

The development of policy and the undertaking of planning constitute efforts to anticipate the future and develop strategies for maximising opportunities in that future. On the surface, those would seem to be straightforward, although not necessarily simple, exercises. However, only a casual examination of situations is sufficient to demonstrate the unsoundness of that expectation. Invariably, and for a variety of reasons, participation is partial and so policy making and planning activities are unrepresentative and, correspondingly, politically biassed. In this paper, partiality of participation is first illustrated and then an attempt is made to explain its occurrence. Subsequently, strategies for ensuring more balanced and representative participation are briefly considered.

The processes of policy development and the undertaking of planning constitute activities directed towards anticipating the future and maximising opportunities in that future. Thus portrayed, they stand with motherhood and a select group of other activities as epitomes of the desirable. But like motherhood and those other activities, policy development and the undertaking of planning can also entail quite inhumane practices, including domination and exploitation, suppression and even deformation. Not least serious among these, however, are outcomes achieved not through actual crude or brutal interactions but quietly and largely invisibly through processes of pre-emption. By such means, particular categories of people are excluded from active participation and, if included at all, then only symbolically or ritually, as in some form of 'stick' or 'shadow' people, seen in convenient, compliant or compatible and essentially emasculated terms. By such means, forms of agreement can be achieved and the conclusion drawn that all positions and views have been considered. This interpretation is readily illustrated in only a brief survey of interest groups and views in respect of education in Australia.[1] In addition, consideration of this mode of acting in relation to some common perspectives or frameworks of assumptions that underlie research, policy formulation and implementation, and other forms of action enables those modes to be understood, and alternative courses of action to be indicated and justified.

Protagonists and positions: Although a central concern here is to establish partiality of representation in collections of protagonists and their views, it is nonetheless useful to recognise problems associated with any attempt to undertake a comprehensive survey. For one thing, protagonists and positions are even more numerous than the members of a society or population. While ultimately individuals have idiosyncratic positions, these can also be expected to vary at different times and in different circumstances. In addition, people form or join groups which develop or take different positions again. A second problem is that articulation of a position and associated views involves particular competencies, conditions and circumstances, and positions espoused or available reflect those kinds of factors. Correspondingly, to consider only available or espoused positions is to pass over an unknown number that are not articulated. Finally, to repeat the point made above, any collection is likely to be incomplete at least partially because of the exclusionary process, varying from the more deliberate to incidental, unintended and even unwitting exclusion.

Given the concern here with establishing partial representation, then only a selective survey of protagonists and positions is necessary. Working from every day experience, telephone directory entries, material coming into a major library, studies and discussions of education, media references and other sources, such a survey readily identifies such major protagonists as parent and teacher associations, post-secondary institutions, and employer and employee

1. This paper draws on work to be reported in a more substantial paper, 'Interests, Protagonists and the Control of Schooling' (in preparation).

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organisations. However, even an extended search fails to reveal the existence of some others, notably organisations representing children or working class parents, or to identify positions or views that adequately represent their concerns. This interpretation can be readily illuminated from a case by case review.

A first group with views on education are the parents of children attending schools. Organisationally, they are represented in two sets of associations, one involving parents associated with publicly operated schools and represented at the national level by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO), and the other involving parents of children attending private schools and represented nationally by the Australian Parents Council (APC).[2] These groups have quite different values and priorities and quite different policies, with a major concern of the former being to support a publicly operated school system with comparable schools for each community, and of the latter to uphold individual and group initiatives, emphasise choice, and favour comparable public support for each child by means of per capita grants to privately operated schools.

It is also arguable, however, that their positions are closer than superficially appears to be the case. While the APC upholds private entrepreneurial activity, with a degree of a 'God helps those who help themselves' orientation, the ACSSO policies, even with their support for special consideration for particularly disadvantaged groups, is far from egalitarian and actually favours the more advantaged, generally middle class children. Hence the two associations can be argued to have much in common and to differ essentially in the organisational means they employ to achieve opportunities for their children, with one primarily using economic circumstances and the other relying on political action.

Teachers are also well able to organise into groups and articulate positions and examination of their associations reveals a structuring that substantially parallels the organisation of schooling. Some groups comprise teachers associated with publicly operated schools, many of which are linked nationally in the Australian Teachers Federation (ATF), while others involve teachers associated with private schools and many of which are in turn linked nationally with the Independent Teachers Federation of Australia. Among the former, a further basis of grouping relates to primary and secondary levels of activity and even to different types of schools, such as the technical and high schools in Victoria, within a particular level of education. Corresponding to those different circumstances are differences in policies. Thus one level such as secondary teachers sometimes uses particular circumstances to justify higher status, salary and other conditions, relative to primary teachers. Similarly, at the present time, probably the most interesting group to observe are those assembling in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector who can be expected to strive for post-secondary or even tertiary rather than secondary status and conditions. The major differences of particular significance here, however, is the one between teachers in public and private schools. Indeed, public school teachers support for a system of public schools and opposition to per capita grants for private schools approximates the position of public school parents, and shares its inconsistency in opposing greater generosity to more affluent parents in the private sector while supporting it in the public sector. In contrast private school teachers have been unobtrusive, largely leaving policy and action in respect of such matters as the support and control of schools to the National Council for Independent Schools (NCIS) which represents governing bodies, principals, parents and teachers. At the same time, there are indications of changes to more assertive positions on conditions and entitlements (e.g. The Age, 30.3.1983).

Adjoining teachers, in a structural sense, is an array of other occupational groups, including administrators, specialists such as teacher educators, curriculum developers, examiners and guidance-counsellors, and a substantial administrative bureaucracy. Again, these groups have different priorities and concerns not only in relation to each other but also with in particular categories; thus schools principals, for example, form associations separate from teachers and from inspectors or superintendents and other administrators, but also according to whether they work in public or private schools. At the same time, these groups are served by

2. The policies of these organisations are set out in a variety of forms and statements but notably in ACSSO's periodical statements of policy and the APC Review and statements on specific issues, e.g. Parental Choice in Education, 1979. Similarly for other associations.

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the operation and functioning of a general system of schools. Indeed, to a substantial degree they, together with teachers, are taken for granted as the proper 'tools of action' so that courses of action are selected or devised on the basis of being implementable through them. Thus their interests are, in a sense, made central to the functioning of a system of schools so that, as the agents of implementation, it is not altogether necessary for them to establish and advance their claims.

Adjoining schooling, again in a structural sense, is a diverse set of tertiary or post-secondary institutions comprising universities and colleges of advanced and of technical and further education. Again, these have a multitude of mechanisms for articulating their interests and concerns. Organisationally, they include the Australian Vice Chancellors Association (AVCC), the Federation of Australian University Staff Associations (FAUSA), the Federation of College Academics (FCA), and others. In addition, senior university and college officials, together with particular academics, regularly articulate their possibly personal concerns and are then readily taken up in the media. And still again these institutions can also service their concerns and priorities by participating in the operation of major managing agencies such as examination authorities, and by generating a comprehensive set of entrance requirements that constitute firm expectations of schooling. However, although the array is quite diverse, it is also structured and coherent, deriving its significance substantially from the position of universities and colleges between schools and the workforce, with the universities having considerable influence, not least because they control entrance to many of the more attractive opportunities.

Still another set of interest groups of considerable significance comprises employers who organise themselves in a considerable array of chambers, federations, associations and other organisational forms. Because their requirements constitute career opportunities for school leavers, their significance is always considerable but in times of high unemployment, such as the present, their requirements are particularly pertinent. They have also pressed their views with considerable vigour in both annual and special reports, in submissions to committees, commissions and other bodies examining situations or problems, and recommending or making policy, and to conferences and on other public occasions, many of which are then reported in the media. At the same time, employers constitute a particularly diverse set of groups so that national presentations can readily gloss important differences between them. A more obvious difference is in terms of levels of requirements which vary from relatively unskilled to technically sophisticated, a range that does much to sustain the graded output of schooling. A less obvious difference is one between employers according to their structural location; Collins and Hughes (1982: 19, 39, 41), for example, argue that company representatives, particularly from less authoritarian organisations, are quite progressive in their educational priorities relative to their colleagues in other situations. At a different level, Galbraith (1977) distinguished between the planned and the market sectors of the economy, identifying the latter as very much subject to circumstances and conditions and the other as including protagonists who are sufficiently powerful as to act upon situations, including not simply the manipulation of systems of education but the more substantial feat of influencing and even destabilising governments.

Alongside employers, in a sense, are employees and they also group in many associations, and collectively in the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). While it has educational concerns, and formulates related policies, that is done substantially as an organisation of employees, preoccupied with the tasks and conditions of work. Indeed, so much is that the case that recent policies have been substantially prepared by members of educational organisations. Now while those policies exhibit broad concerns for the educational experiences of children, they are ultimately and notably constrained by considerations relating to conditions of employment of educational workers.

It is thus evident that the positions and views of many groups can be readily ascertained. However, while that process could be greatly extended and a substantial list portrayed, it is also the case that little or nothing can be established for particular groups such as children and working class parents and it is important to briefly consider their situation.

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Although the largest group associated with schooling, children rarely achieve an association to represent their interests. That is partly because they are organisationally inadequate and unsophisticated, partly because they are more transient in the school situation than others such as teachers and administrators, but largely because they lack the resources and facilities for sustaining a formal association to act on their behalf. In addition, students' shared interests can be very general and particular ones most diverse, so that a single association would have difficulty in developing consensus around policies on many issues.[3] Ironically, however, children are not without representatives ready to act or speak in their name. For example, in the debates on school council changes in Victoria in the early and mid-70s proponents of very different forms of school councils argued that the form they supported was 'in the best interests of the child'. Again, the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education (VISE), like other examining authorities, claims (VISE, 1978: 3-4) it is to offer assistance to youth moving between secondary schooling and employment or further study, although it is difficult to perceive how VISE serves children who are sorted 'out' rather than 'in', or how it is primarily helping children when its main task is to produce performance profiles of children for selectors, and offers nothing to children by way of profiles of places of work or further study. Again, administrators and teachers purport to have children's interests foremost while nonetheless preoccupied with running schools as places of order (e.g. Williams, 1981). Employers likewise express concern but of a kind that would have children shaped more appropriately to their employment requirements (Senate Standing Committee, 1981: 3-10).

An essential point is that in Australia, as elsewhere, the interests of children are real but not well articulated. That situation reflects their relative ineffectiveness politically and, in that circumstance, other interests are promoted energetically, and commonly have priority.

In contrast, it would seem that working class parents have at least two avenues for the presentation of their views, one through their working or trade union associations and the other through parent groups. It turns out that neither speaks adequately on their behalf; as previously noted, trade union organisations are primarily concerned with aspects and conditions of work and accordingly, as has been noted, their educational policies are substantially prepared by educational workers. Inevitably, the interests of children, and even of working class children, are of secondary significance to those working groups.

In respect of parents the situation is not so obvious until particular issues are explored and then we readily see that the circumstances and interests of poorer, working class children are seriously neglected. School funding is one such issue that brings out the unfairness and inadequacy of school arrangements and the neglect of the interests of a particular group such as working class parents and their children.

The general position of public school parents in supporting a system of comparable schools for all children, with additional support for special programs for children experiencing particular kinds of disadvantage, seems at first consideration to be a very reasonable one. It is only when we look at school arrangements in a wider context, such as over the life of the child, that we observe some of its more inequitous features. Thus Karmel (1975: 271) argued that whereas $6,000 of public funds were spent on the education of the early leavers of 15 years of age, something like $70,000 were spent on students who completed the full range of educational programs through to taking out a Ph.D. Now while those figures have changed they still have essentially the same relationship. And again, while the Ph.D. is a relatively rare case, much more significance must be given to graduates who constitute a substantially larger proportion of an age group and, in contrast with early leavers, are clearly from more affluent family circumstances. Thus, existing patterns of expenditure can clearly be seen as a mechanism for distributing greater shares of educational resources to the already relatively affluent and advantaged. Now these patterns of expenditure might be defensible if the social benefits of education were clearly evident, but such is not the case; the clearer picture is of considerable individual benefits from education.

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3. Significantly, student associations have only been sustained at the tertiary level.

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For such reasons a more equitable policy for poorer parents would allocate equal grants to each child that could be used at any point from pre-school through to recurrent educational programs during adulthood. Much fairer again, in offsetting the different circumstances of children, would be a policy of positive discrimination that distributes funds in reverse relationship to parental circumstances so that poorer parents might have all educational expenses paid and wealthier parents receive no public assistance at all.

It is thus evident that concerns of particular groups are not articulated, partly due to a lack of appropriate competencies, partly due to difficult circumstances, but partly also to the preoccupation of more competent or powerful groups with the articulation and promotion of their own concerns. Then, in the absense of expression of concerns and priorities of particular groups, it is impossible for activities such as policy making and planning to be undertaken in a thoroughgoingly, inclusionary way, and take account of the circumstances, concerns and priorities of all people. Inevitably, they must be partial and biassed, and conceivably responsible, even though unwittingly, for neglect and possibly even ill-treatment of excluded groups.

The concern here, however, is with why such situations occur, and so it is to that question that I wish to turn in the last section.

Discussion: The situation presented in this discussion raises a problem of considerable interest in how groups, positions and views are involved or excluded, taken into account or neglected in discussions and programs of action. Here I want to go beyond more obvious explanations, as in terms of relative power, and consider phenomena that underlie perceptions, interpretations and courses of action. These entail perspectives or the frameworks of assumptions from which people perceive, interpret and act.[4] Again, while these are virtually innumerable, being both idiosyncratic and group phenomena, a case can be made by reference to only a few major examples.

One well established perspective that prevailed widely in the 1950s and '60s, particularly among theorists, and appears to still have wide practical usage, is functionalism. Entailing a view of a community, organisation, society or other social entity as an organism, with parts interacting functionally with each other and with the total entity, functionalism appears to have drawn much of its significance from its appeal to societal managers. Adapted to a top-down perspective, it arguably provides a comprehensive view that is convenient to managerial responsibilities and concern with organisational or societal goals, with global measures of performance, and other system problems. At the same time, aspects of a social entity are only taken into account if they are crucial to the functioning of the entity or become troublesome or otherwise problematic for managers. That is, there is no inherent cause for concern with the circumstances of particular groups or with more general issues such as the distribution of costs and benefits in the functioning of a social entity. Indeed, an appropriate metaphor is the one, 'the squeaky wheel gets the most oil', in that attention is given as is necessary to maintain required activity and circumstances, and problems of groups not essential to the productive functioning of an entity are disregarded.

It might seem that a major alternative in Marxism would be more sensitive to people at the 'bottom' of any social entity but that is not clearly the case; Marxism, too, has its 'blind' spots. Major limitations, at least of cruder forms of Marxism, are an over-emphasis on the socialised nature of the person, and the grouping of people into two broad, economically based classes. Curiously, the first entails an odd contradiction, involving assumptions of the constructed nature of the person which effectively negate notions of an active or dynamic personal nature with its self determinism, and are incompatible with criticisms of structures and processes as being alienative, repressive and the like. Those critiques, together with concerns about gender and other groupings, would seem to assume an inherent nature of the person which is not served by prevailing social arrangements. The second limitation generates a deficiency in that by concentrating on two major classes, and the differences and conflicts

4. Perspectives, frameworks or paradigms have had considerable reconsideration in recent years (e.g. Giddens, 1976, 1979; Karabel and Halsey, 1977; Burrell and Morgan, 1979) and this discussion reflects those and other discussions.

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between them, it neglects intra-class differences and conflicts. Accordingly, problems and issues of such sub-groups as poorer, working class parents are not recognised. In consequence, Marxism is also amenable to manipulation by the more powerful within a class, even if to do so is at the expense of their less competent, articulate and powerful 'comrades'.

A more sensitive alternative to those approaches is a humanist-interpretive perspective that blossomed in the 1960s but has its roots in the contributions of such schools of thought as existentialism, phenomenology and interactionism. Collectively, these perspectives celebrate the active, dynamic nature of the person, and give particular significance to such processes as perception and interpretation. Interestingly, this set of perspectives were taken up with the rise of minority group activity in the USA and elsewhere during the more prosperous 1950s and '60s, possibly reflecting a need among minority groups to justify their positions, and among managers to understand and deal with those groups and the movements they promoted. By itself, however, any collective perspective of this kind is both limited and amenable to manipulation by more powerful people, as political and commercial campaign research indicates. That is, it, together with the other perspectives, needs extension in several important respects.

A first important addition draws upon contributions from biology, psychology, sociology and other fields of activity that indicate that people can be regarded as endowed with attributes and a potential to develop with maturation or experience, or some combination of these. It is a consequence of such development that people come to act with particular cognitive styles, communicate in particular kinds of ways, establish personal and social goals and act individually and collectively to achieve them. And those goals go beyond basic biological preoccupations, as with food and shelter, to include socially formed conceptions and objectives such as competence in a variety of forms, aggrandisement in terms of status, wealth and power, and to achieve fulfillment and satisfaction. Indeed, achieving such development can be seen not only as a prospect for every person but as a set of interests that are imperatives that individuals and groups pursue.

The extent to which development occurs, however, is a consequence of many factors and particularly of the resources, including personal and social competencies and other elements of power, that people can marshall. Thus, for example, parents with greater resources can do more to foster or facilitate the development of their children. Similarly, people with greater resources can do more to extend their own development and achievements. Indeed, the significance of power is that it enables people to foster the development of their children and of themselves, even if to do so is at the expense, or against the interests, of those others. For these reasons, power needs to be taken into account.

Power is rarely if ever absolute, however; invariably there is a degree of concern for others or a sense of justice with some recognition of rights of others and acceptance of responsibilities towards them. Indeed, it is a sense of justice that leads one to accept that other people have not only attributes and potentialities but a right to develop those attributes and achieve those potentialities, and so are owed certain responsibilities. Such a position incidentally entails a commitment to impartiality that does not distinguish between people in respect of their rights and obligations towards them.[5]

It has to be recognised, however, that a clear or strong sense of justice has rarely been a strong element in social situations. On the contrary, the considerable interest of people in their own development and achievement usually means that personal concerns and efforts are weighed heavily in relation to group efforts and concerns. Accordingly, while people come together as employers, trade unionists, parents, teachers and so on, it is common for some to fracture off into new or different groups or even to individual actions, if an advantage is gained by doing so. Indeed, the strength of group cohesiveness is probably more a product of external than internal pressures and incentives. However, in respect of schooling, it is not surprising that children are taken advantage of, and that poorer, less powerful parents are

5. For such reasons impartiality, as distinct from say detachment, constitutes a particularly important consideration for social scientists whose special social obligations might be seen as to make impartial observations, analyses, interpretations and commentaries on social situations and issues. Ironically, impartiality in general may require partiality to weaker, more vulnerable groups in the first instance.

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overlooked and even excluded in the consideration of positions and views and in the achievement of advantage.

Given these attributes of people, including a capacity to act collectively as well as individually, then social arrangements can be seen as human constructions and instruments. As such, however, their significance is usually relative to the power that people can muster; for example, those with more can either establish new organisations or achieve control in or through existing ones; those with less can do little more than accommodate to and be dominated by organisations operated by others, while a middle group can seek to enhance their circumstances and achievements by achieving varying degrees of authority and responsibility as bureaucrats or technocrats within such organisations. Thus social arrangements are different things to different people but primarily they are instruments of domination which the more powerful are able to operate.

Now of the many types of organisations or social arrangements, two of especial significance are the economic and the political. One entails the use of material resources and the production of goods and services and ultimately of wealth, and the other the use of authority and ultimately of force. In the first, economic freedom is emphasised and the market place upheld as the venue where ideas and practices are tested. In the second, democratic processes are emphasised and the forum upheld as the mechanism by which decisions are made and policies determined. Both entail the exercise of forms of power and, while complementary, they also constitute alternative mechanisms. At the same time, these portrayals are as ideal types and invariably they differ from reality; differences between people and groups in power invariably result in some coming to dominate others in the market place and the forum, and even for coalitions to dominate in both, as in the corporate state and some other forms of political economy.

Given these predispositions among people and the structural arrangements they produce or sustain, then programs of social undertakings such as the formulation of policy and the undertaking of planning are invariably political exercises. That is, they involve the more powerful in attempts to anticipate the future and arrange circumstances to maximise their opportunities in that future. At the same time, however, in that power is rarely if ever possessed absolutely, but invariably modified by some degree of concern for others, or a sense of justice, then situations of policy making and planning, like others, can be examined to ascertain the forms, extent and consequences of such styles of operating.

Although no simple strategies for examining such activities can be specified, some suggestions can be made. One task entails identification of the developmental interests of people, and the work of Piaget, Maslow and others is helpful in that respect. A second entails the examination of action and interaction to ascertain the account that people take of the interests of others in pursuing their own. But even those two courses of action indicate complexities and difficulties of the tasks involved, as in the characterisation and identification of interests, and in establishing the degree or extent to which they are being achieved or realised. Comparable problems confront policy makers and planners disposed to organise a social entity on a basis that emphasises justice and considers each and every person in their development.

It will also be apparent that a concern with justice could readily be used to justify the development of a thorough-going police or surveillance state. Consequently, other courses of action need to be considered and an obvious one is to reduce the likelihood of domination, exploitation and deformation occurring. One method of doing that is by ensuring that resources, the development of competencies, and other elements of power, are distributed more equally. Such a strategy would give greater reality to the market place and the forum as places of negotiation, compromise and accommodation as more or less equals come to terms with each other. In education, this could mean fundamentally different styles of organising and sustaining educational activities from what is currently the case.

In moving in that direction, however, the implementation of courses of action needs to be seen in the widest possible context. For example, contemporary societies are substantially constituted of many, very large, complex and powerful entities such as states, multi-national

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corporations and the like. A consequence of that reality is that any strategy to redistribute power should probably start with the most powerful entities, because to commence in less powerful sectors such as education may achieve little more than weaken the relatively humane power groups within education and leave the already weak groups vulnerable to more powerful and predatory groups located elsewhere in society.

At the same time, that is not an argument for doing nothing in respect of education. For example, one important strategy could entail the building up of weaker groups while not weakening the more powerful ones or existing structural arrangements. Such a strategy could entail arrangements designed to strengthen the competencies of less competent parents either as educative parents or as activists on behalf of their children. Indeed, it is conceivable that such strategies could unite those working in education while also strengthening it overall as an area of social activity.

Finally, it should also be constantly recognised that a sense of justice, a central element in the development and implementation of such a strategy, is a thin reed on which to base a course of action. Nonetheless, for those committed to the demands of a sense of justice, there is really no alternative to the practice and advocacy of it and a central or basic task is to show its centrality in human activity and portray consequences of its observance and neglect.

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