

EXPECTATIONS

A STUDY OF QUEENSLAND COMMUNITY

OF STANDARDS IN SCHOOLING

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The Queensland Educational Standards for Tomorrow (QUEST), study, was commissioned by the Ministerial Consultative Council on Curriculum in March 1990. The purpose of the study was to assess community expectations of schooling in the P-10 curriculum in Queensland. The study focussed on standards which indicate what is perceived and expected of schooling.

However, before moving on to describe how we approached the study and its finding, we would like to provide a quick summary of the interpretations and analyses of the standards debate which have helped frame our interpretations.

An Historical Understanding of the Standards Debate

There have been three periods of attacks on schooling in the last twenty years in Australia (and, generally speaking, in the UK and US as well). These tend to coincide, as Offe (1984) explains, with periods of economic down-turn or recession. This was also the case in the 1890s and 1930s, as Bessant (1989) points out.

As Bessant notes, there were two noticeable differences between the periods of the 1890s and 1930s, and the contemporary period. These related to the fact that in the past there was a greater percentage of unskilled and semiskilled workers in the population. This situation tended to conceal levels of illiteracy and innumeracy; with the increasing sophistication of work in a post-industrial society, however, the existence of these 'lower standards' have become more noticeable. A second difference relates to the varying degree of public awareness of lowered levels of illiteracy and innumeracy. This awareness has reflected the poor access of workers and persons in the community to information and to participation in the political process.

Despite the differences in all three periods, there has been a general concern and a public rhetoric about aspects of the quality of schooling and the products of schools in an elitist competitive and consumer society. Past concerns were generally, about morality, values and graded progress and while the contemporary rhetoric excapsulates those concerns in the term standards, past descriptions could well be framed in contemporary terms.

In contemporary schooling, the focus of the debate in educational and political circles has been on quality in teaching, teachers, and teacher education. This is reflected in documents such as: Skills for Australia's Schools, Australia's Teachers: An Agenda for the 1890s, the Ebbeck Report and others. Again, the agenda is driven by concerns to build 'a clever country' in the national interest' through a policy corporate federalism (Lingard, Bartlett and Knight, 1990; Lingard, 1991; Bartlett, Knight and

Lingard, 1992). The language on quality represents the rhetoric of politicians and educators but the general concern is with a notion of standards and a general dissatisfaction with many aspects of schools and schooling.

We can conclude then that concerns about 'standards' in schools and schooling have been with us since schools and classrooms, as we know them, evolved.

The Relationship Between Standards and Expectations of Schooling

There is important relationship between expectations and standards: standards indicate what is expected. For example, teaching the information that a student needs reflects what he or she expects or is expected to learn. Embedded in this expectation is a notion of what minimal amount of information might be expected if the student is to learn and what is a good standard of teaching.

What is expected can be understood in two ways. People expect something in the sense that they look forward to or assume the occurrence of a future event. Hence, parents expect that if they send their children to school their children will engage in worthwhile learning. Pupil learning is expected by the very fact of the school's existence in the community. Implicit in this assumption is a notion of standards about schooling.

There is a second sense in which parents may express their expectations of schools. According to this sense, parents not only assume that learning will occur if they send their children to school but their expectation may also include the idea that something is owed. Hence, when a parent says: 'I expect my child will be taught', that parent is saying that his or her expectation is that teaching (and therefore learning) will occur in the future, and that a certain quality of teaching is due and expected for the child. Parents' expectations of schooling can therefore be understood in both senses. They expect that their children's attendance will result in the event of learning. But they also expect as citizens of the state that their children have a right to be educated.

Both sets of expectations are related. Both senses of the meaning of expectations indicate some notion of standards as benchmarks or reference points for parents' judgements about not only what should occur, but what ought to occur. These expectations may take one of three related forms:

• we expect that a standard will supply certainty through an accurate reproduction of a benchmark, for example, standardised measures and performances;

• we expect that the application of standards will provide authoritative control over future events;

• we expect that by maintaining standards we will keep alive

what they stand for.

The first two forms invoke the idea of certainty and are associated with a narrow view of standards as uniform benchmarks and decision rules. In this sense standards are conceived as unchanging, that is absolute as opposed to relative. Standards as absolutes seem to be considered as intrinsic to the idea of something, for example, education. Hence, when the idea of education is made extant, through schooling, the standards that are made "real", vary. They become relative to the circumstances of bringing the idea into reality.

Standards may also be viewed as a quantity and commodity that can be measured with a correctness in, say, economic terms (by measuring and then making correct judgements about greater efficiency and effectiveness). In this case standards are about making judgements against a defined benchmark. It is pertinent to indicate here that there is no reputable evidence that standards considered as particular tangible qualities of public education have declined (see Keeves, 1987).

The third form of expectations are normative in a philosophical sense. that is, they indicate standards as what ought to be done. Hence, by maintaining standards we keep alive what they stand for. For example, the regimental flag recalls past glories which must characterise contemporary feats and the persons who perform them. The flag, as such, does not represent the historical events or glories, but the values attached by the community to the events and to the flag itself.

The example of school uniforms, and specifically the use of gloves as part of a uniform, further illustrates the point. Specific behaviours such as the wearing of gloves may be seen as emblems symbolising what is expected. That is, the wearing of gloves by students in a school may be seen to be the standard for judging the general dress of whole school; in addition, it may also follow that good dress can become a powerful symbol for standards of good behaviour overall, not simply a specific behaviour. There are numerous other symbols in schools by which people judge whether the school is meeting a standard. These include: quietness as an enduring and powerful symbol of good discipline in the classroom; the number of cars outside a school at the end of the day as a symbol of a good school, an active principal, involved parents, an organised and coordinated school schedule, and 'good' teachers at the school (those who do not 'leave' on the stroke of three). However, these symbols and emblems can become ends in themselves. The wearing of gloves becomes an in itself - apart from the end of what it may symbolise (good behaviour).

Quite often however this third form of expectations in relation to standards is confused with the first two forms. This occurs when attempts are made to reveal the intangible nature of standards in a more tangible form (confounded by a view of searching for certainty). Many people, for example, know what good manners are; others want to contest what goodness and manners mean. The idea of good manners may be made tangible when it is

constructed through observation, measurement and judgement. At the same time, it is assumed that the degree of goodness can be calculated and a resultant benchmark or standard, often represented numerically, can be made public. If the latter is true, then there needs to be a debate about what measures represent the standards in question because judgements and expectations should not be construed as 'pure' mental constructs which have no relationship to the context in which they occur. What is considered an appropriate construct or action, that is a 'standard' in one context may not be appropriate in another.

Expectations and judgements are shrouded in the material conditions of their occurrence. These conditions may be the attitudes of people with whom we live, the time of the day, month or year, the weather and so on. So we expect different things from events and people at different times and under different conditions. In considering standards and expectations, we must consider the changing social and political conditions under which they exist because standards may be said to be emblematic of the way we think about ourselves as a community or cultural group. But we seem to ignore this when we endeavour "to establish some ground rules for the debate about standards, to have some agreed premises" (Ford, 1990). We seem to believe that we can achieve an objectivity in establishing ground rules, while ignoring that there are different pathways to arrive at our view of standards. We thereby attempt the impossible, creating ground rules which are non-problematic.

In the present study, the aim was to 'uncover' the community's meanings of standards in the philosophical sense; and to describe the value-laden morality underlying the use of the term.

How the Study was Conducted

The study emphasised the ideas of participation and action. The aim was to be collaborative, communicative and educative of each other in doing the research. The intention was to allow participants to be reflective and to search for the contradictions inherent in their actions and language. This contrasted significantly with approaches to the standards debate so often portrayed by the media.

The method of using roundtables initially enabled the identification of issues and perspectives of a wide range of people representing various groups from the public and private sectors of industry, commerce, and community organisations and associations.

From these statewide discussions an issues paper (presented summarily at the beginning of each section heading in part four of this report) was developed.

Interested groups and individuals were then asked to respond to a survey form indicating the possibilities that they considered reasonable for the future directions of schooling in Queensland.

The chronological sequence of participation reflected the aim of the method in the study to be more, rather than less, inclusive and responsive. The study aimed to reflect the concerns of the community. The sampling of who would participate in the study was both active and passive. Participants in the study were identified in a number of ways: to responses to newspaper advertisements; approaches to diverse groups (parents, professional associations, Aboriginal community groups); handing out information in public places, for example shopping malls; and through mailing materials to individuals and groups who were thought to be interested in having a say in the question of standards and community expectations of schooling. It should be noted that this form of responsive sampling is a valid alternative to probability sampling.

The way the study was designed, beginning with roundtables and then moving to issues paper and survey, allowed the different levels of meanings that participants ascribed to standards to be recorded, along with their justification, as the study proceeded over time.

Participation in the roundtables and surveys extended to parents, employers (small business), middle-managers (both public and private sector), unemployed youth, trainees, public servants, educators (mostly non-school), factory workers, and those involved in community associations (e.g. Rotary, Lions). The arena of schooling discussed within roundtables included both government and non-government sectors, independent and systemic Church schools.

Nine roundtables were held in all and the total number of roundtable participants was 125 people. The survey was then sent out to roundtable participants, others who had expressed interest in participation; it was also sent unsolicited to subject associations, community groups and union representatives. There were eighty-five survey returns.

A key concept in the way the study was conducted therefore was the idea of consultation. The latter was very similar to one of five consultative methods espoused by the Ministerial Consultative Council on Curriculum (Middleton, 1990) which proposed that interest groups be engaged in interaction. This is an active form of consultation and involves 'groups not only as donors of opinion or information, but also in the actual processing of this information'.

In this study, processing information was not simply the means of developing a better understanding of curriculum and standards by participants but it was the means for educating participants to act and change in a non-threatening and non-divisive (but not non-confrontationist) context.

The primary target groups in the study were those people who did not frequently have the opportunity to voice and act out their views; that is, who were infrequently admitted to a consultative process. At the

conclusion of the study, two consequences of the approach to consultation in the study were evident:

while many groups were empowered through interactive consultation within their groups often resulting in a commitment to some form of action, the potential effectiveness of any action was diminished by the fact that few stakeholders participated in the study;

at the same time, participants recognised that stakeholders, represented by executive management in the state education system, were themselves being educated for change in the reorganisation of state education department structures. Little or inadequate consultation with people outside this executive group was perceived by participants in the study.

Hence, there appeared to be two kinds of contrasting views of consultation; one at the local level adopted for this study; another between government and its executive management. The former tended to produce a more liberating view of consultation; the latter might be said to reproduce an existing and passive view of consultation.

Selected Findings of the Study

Many perspectives and viewpoints were expressed about standards and expectations of schooling during the course of the study. These fell into three major themes: curriculum diversity and commonality; involvement in the curriculum process; and the relationship between teachers' work and the quality of student learning.

The findings and issues relating to curriculum, teachers and teaching and school-parent relationships only are presented here.

Curriculum issues

A national curriculum should be developed urgently.

The scope of a national curriculum should be limited to the essentials or basics.

Only when the essential curriculum has been met should other learning areas be given time.

More time in the early years should be spent on repetitive drills, tables, spelling and basic facts.

Among those surveyed, opinion diverged considerably about the five issues identified in relation to the nature of the curriculum and the expectations about curriculum standards. The difficulty in providing clear-cut categorisation of these central issues supported the contention that the

standards in curriculum debate is more complex than has been presented in public forums.

In focusing the debate on curriculum issues, the report not only subsumed the standards debate but provided a much broader basis for discussing communities' expectations of schools. Many of the discussion topics were quite complex and remain unresolved. This reflected the essential character of complexity of curriculum in situations where many people, including teachers, have tended to reduce issues to simple definitive statements about significant problems and likely solutions.

The complexity of the curriculum debate suggested that, in order for discussion to continue, the means employed must be truly educative. Future debate should be problem posing, not merely problem solving. The study showed that, when curriculum decisions are made, all parties should discuss the issues so that people will accept responsibility for their actions.

This appeared not to be current practice. The implementation of School Development Plans was raised as an issue which demonstrated concerns about the process of linking policy makers with the people who enacted and were most affected by the policy.

Teachers and teaching issues:

- In-service education should be mandatory.
- Incompetent staff should be dismissed; adequate numbers of specialist teachers should be appointed.
- Teachers are to teach only subjects for which they are qualified.
- Increase the number of para-professionals on staff.
- Raise entry requirements for teachers.
- Increase supervision of teachers and administrators.

The positive image of teachers and community support for their tasks was a recurring theme amongst the groups. However, more supervision, both collegial and supervisory was seen to be needed to support the classroom practitioner. Again, more parental involvement in debate about education and the students' quality of learning should be more commonplace and less remarkable.

Parent-school relationships:

- School boards should have extended powers over school management.
- Schools should report on a wide range of student achievement.

Parents should become involved in curriculum development.

Concern with the management of schools centred on the quality of service and parent involvement. There was no agreed concept of involvement. Most respondents expected more adequate reporting of student achievement.

Gatekeeping Entry to the Standards and Curriculum Debates

During the course of the study two meta-issues became evident:

- * the assumption of simplicity and common understanding of issues when there is, instead, complexity and varying understandings;
- * the desire for both standardisation and flexibility in nearly all aspects of schooling: from issues to do with the content of the curriculum to the processes of school leadership and decision-making.

It is our contention that these two meta-issues act as overarching constraints limiting the ability of the community to make advances on both individuals' self-understandings and shared-understandings of issues within the standards curriculum debates.

In the study, the community was constituted by several groups of stakeholders all of whom were consulted. In many forums, there were participants from each of these groups all of whom contested views other than their own, struggled to understand their own view or aimed to assert their espoused view on other members of the group. Thus, the phenomenon of the round-table consultations reflected varying degrees of self-understanding and shared-understanding and highlighted the effect of the two meta-issues described above. Many of the issues which participants identified, and discussed, were quite unresolved; and given more time they would probably continue to remain unresolved and problematic.

For example, much of the evidence collected about curriculum reflected a wide range of meanings of the term, and a confusion of definition. This is not to assume that participants did not 'know' what they expected from the curriculum and schools or that they were unanalytic at the level of personal practical knowledge. Rather, their responses reflected the essential character of complexity of curriculum, in an environment where those most responsible for formulating the curriculum, the state and its policy-makers, have tended to reduce this complexity to simple definitive statements.

As a further example, many participants argued for some notion of standardisation in the curriculum. However, the degree of standardisation was problematic: while, for example, they had clear expectations about the feasibility of a common entry age to schools and a common handwriting style for all students, they were also adamant that there should be some elements of flexibility in the curriculum so that the individual experiences of the

child be acknowledged.

However, the roundtable process of making explicit these meta-issues, in order to move towards both shared and self-understanding, a number of additional, but related, constraints became obvious. Some of these were seen by us to have arisen out of, and maintained by, the nature of the media debate on standards and schooling; others were viewed by participants as being constitutive of contemporary schooling. These constraints will be examined in the following two sections.

Constraints Arising out of the Media Debate on Standards and Schooling

It has been suggested (Bannister et al, 1979) that the mass media can be seen as orchestrating the educational standards debate by reproducing and interpreting the issues as defined by individuals and groups whose aims are regarded as legitimate and respected. For example: politicians, employer groups, university professors and spokespersons of educational research and administrative bodies. This process sets the limits within which the issues will be discussed, defined, reacted to and understood.

The public, in all of this, are only peripheral participants in the debate; the public mood is massaged and manipulated by the primary participants for their own ends.

Those with opposing views are put on the defence: they must respond within the limits already set by the media debate rather than being able to challenge the terms of the debate or give alternative definitions of the issues and concerns.

Bannister et al (1979) have illustrated the ideological nature of the debate by highlighting the way that linkages between educational standards, the economy and restructuring are made, and by showing how, especially during times of economic recession, schools, students and teachers can become scapegoats for problems (such as youth unemployment) which have their roots in other issues which, however, are left off the agenda and remain unquestioned.

The essential language of the debate, as framed by the primary definers, includes: soft options, excellence, standards, rigour, discipline, the 3Rs, the basics. This language accommodates the feelings of social unease in a time of social and economic uncertainty. These terms remind us of other terms such as 'permissiveness' and 'personal indulgence' used to describe other areas of social concern. The use of terms like 'discipline' and 'basics' acts to reassure amid a general social anxiety.

However, the way these terms are used mystifies, rather than helps, us to move towards some sense of understanding of the issues. They offer little real help in clarifying what we mean by standards and by 'the basics'.

In the 60s, we enjoyed a period of economic good times. We were taught, at

that time, that participation in schooling would give rise to personal economic success. With the beginning of economic decline during the mid to late 70s this lesson had become difficult to preach. Instead the message being purveyed through the media debate on standards was that schools had failed. They had failed to deliver on that earlier promise.

For some, the answer to this 'failure' was, and is, to return to a halcyon past when schools had time-honoured standards within their keeping; the right standards embedded in their practices. Others (the economic rationalists) or reductionists (Walker, 1991) argue that schools need to be harnessed to the economy in a more direct and responsive manner: that restructuring the economy involves restructuring the schools. On this latter view the standards to be applied are the standards required by the discipline of the market.

In all of the rhetoric adopted by participants in the standards debate, as outlined above, it is taken for granted that there exists a universal meaning for, and a common sense understanding of, 'standards'. Our research makes clear that this is not the case and yet at the same time it is also clear that this widely held taken-for-granted assumption acts to limit debate and constrain participants' expectations of the kinds of outcomes possible in a curriculum debate.

Constraints Imposed by the Nature of Contemporary Schooling

Two considerations arise from participants' responses. Firstly, they perceive that the debate on curriculum, and therefore standards, does not occur at school level and is not inclusive of all stakeholders. The education system is not viewed as liberal enough to allow any an inclusive debate to be 'lived out' in the community. Participants recognised what they saw as only a cursory acknowledgment by government or system managers (executive to middle and school level management) that parents, students and teachers can, in some significant manner, participate in a curriculum decision process. Turning these perceptions around would effectively mean that action across different groups must occur, with those enacting the curriculum, namely the three groups above, being given responsibility, shared if necessary, during the formulation of curriculum.

That arises from the participants' responses is their recognition of the need for common and individual student experiences in the curriculum. Most recognised the individuality of students' experiences and the influence (undefined) that these should have on setting curriculum standards. They also recognised that acknowledging the individual uniqueness of a student's background, and the individuality of his or her interests and talents did not mean an indulgence in the uniqueness of the individual.

What many participants were attempting to define was the relationship between the need for all students to have common experiences in the curriculum and their need to be allowed individual experiences. Their responses reflected the search for a balance between common learning and

the uniqueness of the individual. The exploration of this relationship and the search for a balance is the central issue in future curriculum development in this site.

The second consideration arises out of participants coming to the complexity of the curriculum debate that appeared to be recognised by many participants in the study suggested that any future debate or forums for discussion should be educative. Discussion of standards in the past has tended to be combative rather than constructively confrontational with clashes among groups with different ideological interests. Future debate should be problem posing as well as problem solving thus recognising the complexity of curriculum, and that short term 'solutions' instigated by the particular political interests of an individual or group will only result in nominal curriculum change.

Currently, there are few links among people at different levels in the educative process. Teachers and principals continue to isolate parents in many important curriculum processes. Parents when they do participate in some way in school curriculum decisions do not have to bear, for better or worse, the consequences of their participation. In brief the meaning given to participation is narrowly defined. True participation means that participants not only have the power to act, but must also accept the responsibility for their actions. The evidence from this study suggests that this does not occur in the Queensland education system.

At the same time, simply setting up structures is inadequate unless they are coupled with an educative program to help all people to know how to participate in change. The perceptions of participants in the study was that this education was at executive management level but not at local levels in the education system. One example emerging from the study was related to the School Development Plans. There was a high level of scepticism among participants about this initiative from the centre, that is, from executive management of the education system. Many participants also recognised that principals and school responses tended to be driven by the need to satisfy bureaucratic requirements. The example illustrates the need for linking educational policy-makers with those people who enact and who are most affected by the policy.

This recognition that many people are excluded and marginalised in the education decision-making process raises the question about who should be involved in the debate about curriculum and standards, and how the debate should be framed. Currently, the debate on standards is framed in the narrow terms used by the media to sensationalise the opinion of vocal minority groups. Who is heard seems hardly an issue. Hence the pungent comment of one participant (a parent) that "the greatest fear of all is the unknown and education today is an unknown to students, teachers and parents". One consequence of this is a very narrow basis for dialogue. But it also results in parent and teacher groups talking from 'bits' of personal experience. Because of their exclusion, they tend to talk from an emotionally charged and isolated position. More importantly, they fail to

see the broader context which is made up of many viewpoints at different levels or positions in the educational process.

This situation largely accounts for the fact that the debate on educational standards tends to be episodic and narrowly confrontationalist. Hence, it seems imperative that people, especially parents, students and teachers, are no longer marginalised; and that their ideas be given the status of probable implementation (it was significant during the conduct of the study that many participants were openly cynical about the process in the government's *Have Your Say*). The experience of the roundtables was one of participants' sense of urgency which was an expression of perhaps a fading grasp to take the opportunity to represent a view within the recognised context of a dominant central decision-making process. The latter theme of centralization versus decentralization pervaded the discussion on many issues relating to the curriculum and the standards debate.

Conclusion

The word curriculum can be thought about in a narrow or broad sense. The former views curriculum as what happens in the individual classroom, the experiences of the individual child or teacher. Many teachers and others see standards as being set only within the confines of schools. The broader view considers that standards are constructed through larger societal contexts. Hence, national objectives and frameworks set directions for what standards schools will follow and what the nation wants from its schools.

Agreement about what we expect from schooling may be based on a superficial understanding about what is agreed. We need to make explicit exactly what is agreed and expected in order to arrive at a shared understanding - this involves some consensus approach which recognises the provisional nature of the understanding. In this process we may need to make explicit the contradictions in what is understood and agreed about standards - this involves some conflict approach. If there are 'provisional ground rules for debate', it is necessary to establish what approach is adopted: what sets of assumptions we make about what is knowledge; what is our world view; what is the nature of our being in the world; and what is it that allows us to know about standards.

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