

WHITHER SCHOOL COUNCILS?

Izabel Soliman

Department of Social, Cultural and Curriculum Studies

University of New England

Armidale NSW *

This paper presents work in progress in analysing data gathered in the course of a three part project concerned with the functions and operations of school councils in seven state schools in northern New South Wales. The first part of the project consisted of a case study of the operation of the school council in a large secondary school of 750 students, Greengage High (fictitious name), begun seven months after the council's establishment and conducted by means of participant observation of council meetings over a period of twelve months and interviews with all members of the council. The case study was the basis for the development of a questionnaire to survey the perceptions of school councillors in the other schools. The trial of the questionnaire, in Singing Bird Primary, (fictitious name) a school of 250 pupils, and the analysis of the councillors' responses comprised the second part of the study. The survey of the perceptions of school councillors in 5 other schools, by means of the revised questionnaire, comprised the third part of the study. This paper is based on the analysis of the data gathered in only the first and second parts of the project.

The case study and the pilot were concerned with investigating the processes by which the council was established, its composition and manner of operation, the procedures used to conduct meetings and to arrive at decisions, the nature of the issues discussed, councillors' perceptions of the implications of their decisions for various aspects of the school's operation; their perceptions of what is involved in being a councillor, and why individuals are willing to take on these roles.

Context of the Study

The establishment of the school councils at Greengage High School and Singing Bird Primary School occurred in the context of the sweeping changes in education implemented by the NSW State Government in line with the recommendations of the Scott and Carrick Reports (Management Review, 1989; NSW Government, 1989). Both reports advocated the establishment of school councils, a move strongly supported by the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations (1988). While there has been a history of some pressure towards democratization and community participation in education in NSW (Soliman, 1991) there has not been a movement strong enough to justify the rate at

which school councils have been introduced. From a total of 17 councils at the end 1989 their number had increased to 1,172 by June 1993 (Boston,1993). Their establishment needs to be

* Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the AARE, University of Newcastle, Nov 27- Dec 1, 1994.

appraised in conjunction with the curriculum changes introduced at the same time by the Department of School Education (DSE) which greatly increased central control of the curriculum through prescription of Key Learning Areas and standardised testing. It is not surprising, therefore, that the introduction of school councils may be regarded by some members of the education community with some scepticism (Soliman, 1991).

Theoretical Framework of the Study

The theoretical framework of the study is that of micropolitics, a term coined by Iannaccone (1975) to describe the politics that takes place in and around schools. In micropolitical analysis researchers focus on the strains, tensions and rival interest in and around schools, the processes by which the school arrives at decisions, policies and regulations, on how power, influence and control are manipulated to further the interests of individuals or of groups, on how conflict is managed and how actions and decisions are rationalised and legitimated. Some of the themes emerging in the micropolitical analysis of schooling have been identified by Marshall and Scribner (1991) as the ideologies and values of people in and associated with schools; the negotiation of boundaries (as between parents, teachers and students); the remaking of policy to fit the school; the use of language, symbols and interactions to create reality or to determine which issues and questions are normal, relevant and critical, or irrational, irrelevant or illogical; how conflict is kept within the confines of the school or 'privatised'; and how tasks and structures link up or intertwine around which coalitions and loyalties develop.

Establishment of the School Councils

It was in this climate of change and uncertainty in the DSE shortly after the publication of the above reports, that the principals of

Greengage High and Singing Bird Primary schools indicated to the P and C Associations and the school staff that they were in favour of school councils and proposed that they should be formed in their schools. Sub-committees of the P and C were established to consider the matter, which in due course reported in their favour to the P and C. The teaching staff also met on separate occasions to discuss their views about a council.

Minutes of the teachers' and of the parents' meetings at Greengage High indicate the nature of their concerns. The concerns of the P and C were over the possibility of conflict arising between teachers and parents in a council; uncertainty about the authority of the school council and its ability to influence educational outcomes; confusion over the roles of the P and C and the council; and concern over the apparent apathy of parents as only a few of the 519 families appeared to be interested in the P and C. The teachers' list of concerns was much longer but was summarised under the categories of membership of the council; its influence over the school's finances; the council's organisation; and the power of the council in relation to that of the teaching staff.

The representative group of parents and teachers which drafted the constitution at Greengage did their best to meet these concerns and to allay the fears of both groups. That they were successful in achieving this was evidenced by an almost unanimous vote by parents and teachers present at a special meeting in favour of the finally drafted

constitution which followed the guidelines published by the DSE. However, the concerns of the two groups were not entirely put to rest as the ensuing months were to reveal.

The draft constitutions of both schools were finally approved by the Assistant Director General (ADG) of the Region, which was a Departmental requirement in the establishment of councils.

Facilitating Factors

Greengage High and Singing Bird Primary schools were among the first schools in the region to establish school councils. Council members saw themselves as participating in a new venture and being innovative was perceived as an advantage as there would be no examples of successful practice as a yardstick for comparisons.

At Greengage, nearly 18 months elapsed between the initial meeting and the first official meeting of the full council. Looking back on this formative stage two years later, several members of council commented that it was the enthusiasm of the principal which was the most significant catalyst in its establishment. The principal was strongly

motivated to introduce a participative organisational structure as evidenced by her personal beliefs and by her postgraduate studies in school and community relations. She stated she did not need the Scott and Carrick reports to convince her of the need for a school council type of organisation "as a method of widening the decision making base, for making better decisions and for providing support for the school." She also felt that school councils would address the problem of relevancy in the curriculum and "the failure by teachers to be accountable and to consider the views of parents in a variety of issues related to schools." While admitting her own commitment she did not feel that hers was a widely shared attitude among other principals. There was also a lack of conviction expressed by some teachers and parents about the need for school councils at a subsequent seminar organised by the Department to further educate the public on their value.

At Singing Bird Primary the principal was also very supportive and neither the parents nor the teachers reported major objections to the council's establishment.

Composition of Councils

The composition of the school councils was in accord with Departmental guidelines in that the balance of members was in favour of the community in both schools. At Greengage, of the seven parent members, four were elected by the P and C, one was the President of the P and C, and two parents were co-opted members of the community and had to be approved by the ADG. This requirement was interpreted by some councillors as a lack of trust in the other council members to make the appropriate decision on which people to co-opt. Of the four teacher members, one was the principal and the executive officer of the council and three were elected from the school staff. Two students were elected by the Student Representative Council (SRC).

At Singing Bird, the five parent members included the President of the P and C and a co-opted member. There were no elections held for the other three parent members as their nomination was not contested. Of the four teacher members, one was the principal and the other three were volunteers with no election required as their nominations were

also uncontested.

The names of the councillors suggest that the majority are from English speaking backgrounds and all reported to be Australian born. There were no councillors from any visibly ethnic minority group except for one co-opted parent at the secondary school who was of Aboriginal ancestry although at Greengage there were also students of African, Indian, Malaysian, Asian and Melanesian ancestry.

The average age of the school councillors, excluding students, was 45. At Greengage, 75% of councillors and at Singing Bird 55% were males. The presidents of both councils were parent members, in accord with Departmental guidelines. They were also males.

In occupation the parent members were professional and business people.

At Greengage one of the parent members was a teacher, another was a school administrator and a third was a teacher educator at a nearby tertiary institution. At Singing Bird one of the parent members was also a teacher.

At Greengage, all the teachers were experienced in attending and chairing meetings as part of their work or as members of other organisations. They also reported previous involvement with parent groups associated with the school or in other organisations. Most of the parents also reported long experience with P and C associations or with other organisations where some had also held executive positions. The two students at Greengage claimed experience in being members of the SRC, which held regular meetings, and in organising social and cultural events throughout their high school careers.

Why Become a Councillor?

A variety of reasons were given for wanting to be councillors. One parent saw it as a continuation of previous P and C involvement; another, suspicious of councils, saw involvement as a way of protecting P and C funds; another saw it as a continuation of his current involvement in small business; for others it was a way of satisfying a desire to help run the school; or fulfilling a sense of duty as a parent to make a contribution; for another it was a response to an invitation from the principal to become a councillor; and another saw her participation as a demonstration to her daughter of an interest in her schooling.

A teacher member of council was intrigued by the concept of councils and wanted to find out more; another considered it an important concept and wanted to make it work; while a third was interested in seeing how councils would function.

Functions of the Councils

At Singing Bird, the council's constitution specifies decision making, advisory, and public relations functions. The decision making functions include:

- * determining broad school policy, student welfare policy, the school's fair discipline code

and the community's use of school facilities;

- * determining the school's broad budget priorities and developing a budget plan;
- * and establishing policies for community use of school facilities.

Other functions include:

- * fostering close links between the school and its community;
- * encouraging and promoting community participation in the school;
- * and participating in selection of a new school principal.

At Greengage, the constitution stipulates that the decision making functions of the council include:

- * determining the educational aims, needs and priorities of the school;
- * determining the school's broad budget needs and priorities;
- * and establishing policies for community interaction with the school.

Despite these statements, an influential council member regarded the council's main role to be an advisory body to the principal and the school's executive, not a decision making body, and as a forum for the discussion of issues of concern to all stakeholders.

Issues Discussed by Council

At Singing Bird Primary, the survey of councillors' perceptions indicated that matters related to the school budget and school facilities were the agenda items upon which most time was spent at meetings, followed by school aims and goals, and student welfare matters. In addition, the majority of councillors believed that they should have input into decision making about the courses offered in the school, the selection of teaching staff and the assessment of students' progress.

At Greengage, the issues the council dealt with either came down to the school from the DSE as a result of mandatory policies to be implemented statewide or as policy proposals for consideration, or were issues identified by the the school as matters of priority.

The financial affairs of the school fell into the first category and occupied a significant portion of the council's. One of the first sub-committees of the council to be established was the finance sub-committee, in recognition of the demands that the Departmental policy of "global" budgeting (i.e. allocation of a lump sum of money to the school for its operation) placed on the principal who bears the responsibility for the accuracy of the school's accounts. This sub-committee, which included one of the co-opted community members, met once a month to discuss the overall school budget and the program and proposals which came forward from departments and teachers that had budget implications, such as the upgrading of library equipment, the purchase of a bus, the cost of irrigating the school grounds. The

finance committee brought its recommendations to council for consideration. However, the onus was still on the principal for making global and program budgeting work. The principal believed that the school was not getting free professional consultancy from its co-opted members, a common perception, only a different perspective on decision making. Some teachers were apprehensive that the principal was becoming so heavily burdened with financial and managerial responsibilities that she would seek to allocate funds to hiring a bursar which they feared would be at the expense of a teacher. A discussion paper distributed by the DSE subsequently confirmed their fears in proposing to give schools and councils that sort of staffing flexibility.

Since the DSE adopted a policy of mainstreaming pupils with learning disabilities, the school was asked to accept two classes of intellectually disabled children from a special school which was to be closed. This was another issue which had come to the school in the

form of a directive and occupied the council's time. Over the year it became an issue of increasing concern as there were Departmental delays in beginning the alterations to the parts of the school which were to accommodate these students.

Another issue in the same central policy category concerned the procedures by which teachers are appointed to schools. Teachers in NSW are opposed to the procedure of local selection whereby teachers apply to a school for an advertised position and are then interviewed by a panel which includes a teacher, the principal, the cluster director and a member of the community. While the Greengage's constitution precluded a member of council advising the principal on the employment of school staff, the appointments of teachers by local selection was nevertheless an issue for discussion by the council since teachers had decided to take industrial action to demonstrate their opposition to the policy.

A related issue which occupied the council's attention was the Department's discussion paper, "Your School's Right to Choose," on the proposed variations to the staffing formula used to allocate teachers to schools. The school council's response indicated that the council had found little educational merit in the proposal.

The other issues which were the focus of the council's attention at Greengage were identified by a sub-committee formed to survey perceptions of staff, students and parents of the school's needs and priorities. The needs identified and adopted by the council as the basis of its program for budgeting included improvement and beautification of the school's external environment, repairs to school buildings, replacement of the school's mini bus, refurbishment of classrooms, and upgrading of classroom equipment. Another need was

identified by the finance committee during its consideration of the overall school budget which revealed that water, much of it used for irrigation of the school's grounds and playing fields, was a major cost to the school. The need to improve the school dams as a means of reducing expenses was therefore taken up by the grounds sub-committee, formed to address the issue of improving and beautifying the school grounds.

These issues, originating with the DSE and from within the school have driven the council's agenda at Greengage and have been the focus of its deliberations.

Conduct of Meetings and Decision Making

The monthly meetings of the council at Greengage and Singing Bird were strongly structured by the agenda which was formulated by the elected president of the council and the principal, in accord with Departmental guidelines for school councils. The desirability of their control of the agenda was, in fact, raised by one of the teachers at Greengage, who saw some merit in other people drawing up the agenda.

At Greengage, no business was dealt with, e.g. under other business, unless it had been listed on the agenda, however, notice could be given at the meeting of an issue to be discussed or a motion to be raised at the next meeting. These practices were used to limit the length of meetings but they also added to the formality of the meetings in that issues which might arise between the writing of the agenda and the meeting itself or spontaneously at the meeting, could not be dealt with until the next month's meeting. The president expressed the view that if interest in an item could not be sustained until the next meeting

then the item was perhaps not worth discussing. The agenda for every meeting included reports from representatives of parents, students and teachers.

The chairing of the meetings was rotated among members at Greengage, a strategy which distributed responsibility for the conduct of meetings and gave those new to formal meetings experience at chairing them. At Singing Bird they were always chaired by the president. The task of keeping minutes of the meetings was not rotated at Greengage or Singing Bird which meant that the secretary was not free to be involved with the discussion as was the president. Most of the council members were in favour of these practices, including the secretary, and considered them to be necessary for the efficient conduct of the meetings. Some members were more task oriented than others and thought that the meetings would be more efficient if the chair was not rotated. At Greengage, unlike Singing Bird, the minutes of the meetings were distributed with the agenda well in advance of the meeting and overall,

one had the impression that the foundations had been laid for the orderly, businesslike conduct of meetings.

The meetings usually lasted from two, to two and a half hours, but occasionally they were longer. At Greengage they were low key in energy and over the 12 month period, there was only one occasion when strong emotion was expressed by members over an issue, that of frustration over the delays on the part of the Department in repairing dangerously delapidated school buildings. The principal had to seek clarification from the Department about whose responsibility it was to meet the cost of repairs in the context of budget devolution. Otherwise there were no energetic disagreements over issues or heated debates conducted. Interactions were subdued, controlled and of low intensity.

A large proportion of each meeting time was spent on listening to reports from the principal, from individuals chairing sub-committees or assigned the task of investigating a matter, or reporting on behalf of the P and C, the teachers or the students; in other words, as "recipients of information rather than participants in discussion" (Ball, 1987, 238) or in decision making. Basic values, goals and commitments were infrequently explored at length since the majority of the issues discussed were of a practical and technical nature, or if they were not, such as the school budget, the cancellation of school dances due to drinking, the school management plan and the school's vision statement, they tended to be treated as such. Issues which had curriculum or staffing implications were often raised but seldom discussed. On the few occasions when questions of value were raised and assumptions explored, for example, in relation to equity issues involved in the local selection of teachers, or on the basis of designating a school a 'centre of excellence', there was an obvious increase in the attentiveness of council members and in their participation.

Decisions were arrived at by means of a motion usually put by the person chairing the meeting, and assent was indicated verbally, usually in quiet tones. There were seldom any dissenting votes on an issue. In the words of a parent, "I don't think we have had any sort of meaty subjects come up which are likely to cause conflict yet. There must come a time when there is conflict."

During the period of the study, the council at Greengage made many small decisions but few major ones and issues were often delegated for further work by a sub-committee, or to the principal, or the P and C. While this meant that the decisions made were well considered, some

members expressed impatience with the slowness of the pace particularly at the beginning of the council's life when "For a long time we were just feeling our way," as one teacher put it. Policy decisions were

only made after each of the relevant constituencies had been consulted, however, the SRC was seldom referred an issue for consideration. Before any payments of funds was made, a program budget had to be submitted to council for consideration and approval. Finding out who had vested interests in an issue, obtaining more information, careful planning, further discussion before taking action, certainty that any action was in agreement with the views of the people to be affected, characterised the conduct of the meetings and were the qualities emphasized by council members. Because decisions were often deffered from one meeting to the next, one had the impression of movement in slow motion. Nevertheless, one parent expressed the view that teachers sometimes pressed rather too hastily for action on an issue when it seemed to him that more reflection was required.

Not all decisions were made at the council meetings. The principal and the president frequently communicated with each other between meetings to make decisions about the agenda, to discuss the timing of introducing certain issues, to make sure that they were well prepared for the meeting, and that the meeting would not go on till all hours which in her view could lead to losing people "if they meandered on into all hours and we went home all absolutley wrung out and exhausted at the end of it."

The majority of council members expressed satisfaction with the way meetings were conducted and claimed to feel comfortable with the formality of the procedures. As one teacher noted,

"I have seen too many meetings where...people arrive at meetings with ideas that they have done absolutely no research for ... and they come in shooting from the hip and the meeting wastes so much time because they are just giving opinions which have very little substance. I find that so very frustrating. Whereas with this meeting procedure that we have, if somebody wishes to put a view, they have to have thought it out and they have to present it for the agenda beforehand."

Although experienced in attending and chairing meetings, most of the parents and the students at Greengage spoke of some feelings of anxiety and nervousness at their first few meeeetings arising from lack of knowledge about the school and with what the council would be concerned and from apprehension about feeling out of their depth.

Relationships among Councillors

The relationship among parent, teacher and student councillors at Greengage may be described as task oriented, businesslike and cordial. Socialising was a secondary concern, and occurred over supper, provided by a different person each time, after the meeting. One of the students commented that, for a while, this was the best part of the council meetings which at first "were all talk and no action". The

suppers were certainly welcome refreshment after an extra long meeting and were an opportunity for members to become better acquainted with each other. Some parents and teachers had social contact with each other outside of school hours, but friendship ties were more frequently mentioned as within rather than across the three groups. One parent mentioned that she expected more of a social introduction to members "to break the ice" when she joined the council but, it seemed to her that it was assumed that she already knew everyone although that was not the case. When two new students joined the council they were

politely introduced but there was no opportunity before the meeting to socialise with them to personally convey expressions of welcome. During the case study the council did not meet for a social function, such as a lunch or dinner, as a strategy to strengthen ties of affiliation or to build a stronger sense of belonging to the group. The formal meeting structure adopted for the meetings shaped the nature of the largely task oriented relationships across groupings.

For some teachers attendance at council meetings was at times "a burden", particularly when meetings ended at 11pm on a school day, with a working day to follow. The feeling of council being a burden was expressed both at a meeting and at an interview and may be the reaction to what Apple (cited in Ball, 1987) calls the "intensification" of teachers' work which reduces leisure and self direction. Teachers certainly commented on the increased pressure they felt as a result of the changes schools were required to make.

Boundary Maintenance and Negotiation

Teachers claimed to respect the right of parents to have a say in their child's education, however, they reserved the right to implement policies according to their own judgement. As one of the teachers expressed it,

"I would be very concerned if they [parents] became involved in selection of specific aspects of the curriculum. ...I think it would be most unfortunate if people came to tell me, for example, how after twenty years of teaching that I should use a particular teaching technique in my classroom."

The majority of parents deferred to the expertise of teachers over curriculum matters. In the words of one parent, who was herself well educated and a professional person,

"What are teachers doing long difficult courses to become teachers for if they're not professionally really capable of knowing what to teach and how to teach it?"

The interviews with the teachers revealed some wariness of the council on their part, not of individuals as such, but of the authority the council might acquire over their work as a result of Departmental policy. The boundaries of this authority were set by the constitution adopted by the council. There were several occasions during the year when the teachers affirmed the boundaries of the council's authority by reference to the constitution. The role of parents on council was also indirectly defined by reference to the P and C's fund raising activities. The fund-raising role was frequently affirmed at council meetings rather than the P and C's role as a forum for parents to discuss educational issues and to convey their views to council through their representatives. Also, there was an element of distrust directed toward the Department which carried over to the council, which could be regarded as the Department's creation. On one occasion a teacher commented that councils were formed because teachers could not be trusted to make the right decisions.

The teachers did not see any conflict with the parents but regarded both groups as being "in the dark," with parents being more so in relation to the problems in the system. They saw themselves as being in the dark "because all the issues have not been laid on the table." The teachers' fears about the Department's plans for the council surfaced with each Departmental initiative which seemed to augment the

role of the council. In relation to the Department's document "Your School's Right to Choose," both parents and teachers regarded the document as unsatisfactory, misleading, unclear and ambiguous. A working party of parents, teachers and students was formed to draft a response. The teachers on council mooted their desire to also formulate their own response which suggested that they were not sure if the council's response would represent their interests well enough. As it turned out, only the council's response was sent to the Department.

Most of the parent members were reluctant to express an opinion in relation to having a council member on a school committee to select a 'leading' teacher which the school had been allotted by the Department. They knew that the teachers were opposed to the local selection of staff and preferred the traditional central allocation. The parents did not wish to say anything at council meetings which might be regarded as criticism of the teachers and might alienate them. One parent mentioned that on one occasion she had thought of presenting some ideas on how parents might be brought into the school community to a greater extent but on reflection decided that it might put teachers on the defensive and she censored it as not an appropriate issue to raise.

Coalition Rather than Partnership

Some parents at Greengage, as at Singing Bird, felt that they had a right to have a say about the content of the curriculum and the allocation of resources but because of their general deference to the teachers, the majority of them did not see their relationship with teachers as a partnership. It was more of a coalition of groups for a certain purpose. For example, at Greengage, they were willing to support the teachers in actions designed to upgrade the resources of the school. In relation to the much needed repairs to the school buildings, parents were willing to approach the local member of parliament to ask him to inspect the school and to see what needed to be done. Like the teachers, they expressed frustration at the Department's inaction. They also shared the teacher's concern over the principal's budgeting task and the financial activities that schools had to assume, and the teachers' suspicion of political motives behind some central policies.

They were also vigorous in their support of the teachers in their response to the document "Your School's Right to Choose," which they condemned for putting financial considerations above educational ones. They also empathised with the teachers' apprehension about their future employment security and their uncertainty about what new policies would next emanate from Sydney. The council's strongly worded response to the discussion paper stated that "we are not confident that central policy makers are thinking carefully enough about policy change to the point where we can be confident that assurances given today will be honoured tomorrow." The statement also strongly supported public funding of education and rejected any proposal which merely hinted at the possibility of reducing this provision.

The students did not see themselves in a partnership situation with the parents and teachers either, although they had opportunity to chair meetings and had been reassured that "on the council everyone was equal." One of the students noted that in spite of this reassurance, they did not feel equal, and outside of the council, the usual teacher/student relationship prevailed. The feeling of being unequal was also perhaps reinforced by the tendency not to refer issues to the

SRC for comment. Neither the teachers nor the parents involved the students as much as they could have in the various tasks taken on by council. They appeared to underestimate the abilities of students and there was far less expected of 17 and 18 year olds than could have been or which is expected of young people their age out in the work force. It was interesting to learn in the interview that one of the students held a part-time job and had experience in work-based consultative meetings with her employer.

Relationship with the Principal

The stance taken by the principal and the parent members of the Greengage council was that of "open principal - acquiescent and hesitant council", one of the six relationships identified by Fitzgerald and Pettit (1978) in their study of Victorian school councils. She saw herself as caught between two forces, accountable to the Council as well as the Department, and having to satisfy both was not an easy task. She also saw her role as increasingly in the area of policy development and negotiation, with the deputy principals handling the actual management of the school. Like the "open" principals in Victoria, the principal of Greengage tried to induce parents to assume a greater educational role. She had support from the council's president, a teacher educator, but he always advocated a cautious, careful approach after guidelines had been formulated and boundaries of the council's sphere of action negotiated in line with the constitution. At a council meeting where the principal proposed the formation of a curriculum sub-committee she argued that the time had come for council to become involved in curriculum work, that it would be a developmental exercise for everyone involved and that "it was one of the reasons for having a council in the first place". She maintained that the council's involvement would enrich and yield better decisions and make her feel more secure. She tried to demystify curriculum decision making by indicating that curriculum work would involve consideration of policy, of procedures and the introduction of new courses. In response, parents expressed lack of confidence to participate, that "they did not have enough information" for decision making, and that the task seemed "overwhelming." The curriculum sub-committee was, nevertheless, formed some six months later, and one of the parents, who had initially expressed reluctance, offered to participate with the intention of learning more about the curriculum.

The principal also sought the support of the council in defending the image of the school when she felt it was under threat by a competing institution applying to be a "centre of excellence" in a subject area in which Greengage also excelled. She received the council's support and by raising the issue, she prompted a serious discussion which centred on the nature of the assumptions underlying these awards. This led to the view that the Department was putting schools in an absurd situation of competition within the school since one or two departments, not the whole school were the means for earning the designation, and with other schools. Support for the principal was more a support for her actions in defense of the school's image rather than support for the idea of a centre of excellence.

At Singing Bird Primary, the majority of councillors expressed the view that members of council supported the principal, avoided conflict, strived for consensus, and co-operated with the principal in sharing responsibility for decision making.

Perceived Value of the Council

During the period under investigation one could say that the members of the Greengage council were feeling their way towards some sort of understanding of their own roles and that of the council's. With the encouragement of the principal, the parent members were cautiously venturing into new areas of responsibility, such as the curriculum sub-committee. Being on council was a learning experience for parents in spite of their long experience as P and C members. As one parent commented

"I have learned a lot about what is actually going on in the school, what the status quo is. I have learned a lot about the difficulties that teachers have, in making change or presenting their ideas to the school; that they have got to tread on egg-shells ...It's a very diplomatic set-up. ...I have got to know the teachers a little better."

For teachers the learning curve was not as steep but nevertheless challenging. The following view was shared by the teachers:

"I am enjoying the learning process of how this whole new structuring is dependent on that group of people who are called the council and how the school is going to function under that new regime and how parents can be brought into the system so much more."

Another teacher felt that "there is something positive going on here and it is worthwhile being involved."

The principal mentioned the value she perceived in community support in relation to the maintenance problems of the school in terms of "I think we really believe something is going to happen this time and we don't believe it would have happened if there hadn't been a community pushing." The teachers too perceived the council to have more clout than individual groups.

At Singing Bird, parents perceived the benefits of councils in terms of acquiring a broader view of policies, developing understanding of how schools operate, greater involvement of parents in school matters and providing support for the principal. Teachers also listed this as a benefit, along with a perception of more political clout for the school, greater understanding of parents' views, and a closer relationship between parents and teachers.

What is the Future for School Councils?

The parents in both schools expressed good will and strong support for

teachers in the two schools. Some of them were cautiously venturing into new areas of responsibility, such as the curriculum sub-committee, with the encouragement of the principal, but not all parent members of the councils wished to have greater responsibility for decision making in schools. In the other schools in the immediate area, there was also a feeling of satisfaction with the status quo. At a meeting of representatives of 18 school councils, the author proposed that a regional council for school councils be formed, to encourage communication and networking among school councils, to canvass and pool community perceptions of problems and solutions in the region, and to advise the ADG on the perceptions of councils on school needs as input into the development of the region's strategic and management plans. Parent representatives at that meeting did not perceive a need for such a structure at this time and thus no action was taken on the matter. It remains to be seen how widely held these perceptions are in the

region.

At present, the power over decision making in relation to staffing and the curriculum lies with the principal and the teachers, and the parents and community members, on the councils studied, have not openly contested the teachers' dominant role. The council's power in relation to the allocation of resources has consisted of approving requests which has had the positive effect of requiring teachers to develop clearly formulated justifications for requests for funds.

Parents proved to be ready to ally themselves strongly with the teachers when a situation arose where they clearly understood that there would be negative effects on the school. But there were many aspects of the school's operations that they did not completely understand in spite of their long association with P and C groups, and the experience of being on the council and meeting once a month was providing a very slow and rather piecemeal education on how the school operated. One relatively well informed parent commented on the need for

"More information on other ways of doing things and of looking at problems relating to schools...a broadening of horizons of how systems can be worked...There are probably a lot of different systems and different ways of functioning elsewhere in schools that we are totally unaware of so we plod along in our own little rut. A school just seems to get caught up in its own system, the same as our own lives and our own profession and you just go along in that direction."

They did not regard the council as representative of the parent body and felt that schools could do much more to involve parents through informal social activities, to make them feel welcome and to harness their resources and talents more effectively. None of the parent members felt comfortable enough in the school to venture into the staff

tea room to have a chat with teachers without being invited.

The teachers on the Greengage council did not seem to value the council for its potential of developing a sense of partnership with parents. They did not, for example, seem to be prepared for the possibility of justifying their teaching practice to parents, a situation which may arise as parents become more knowledgeable about the education system and more confident about expressing their own points of view to teachers (Pettit, 1980). If teachers are not used to, or prepared, to articulate a rationale for their teaching practice, then they are not likely to respond to such requests from parents without feeling threatened or defensive, and these feelings are not conducive to the development of a partnership.

The constitution of the council and the structure and dynamics of meetings were used by teachers to reinforce the boundaries of their decision making domain. For example, the role of the P and C was repeatedly differentiated from the council and defined as a fund-raising body rather than a forum for parents to discuss their views on general and local educational issues to be brought before the council by their parent representatives. They also wished to consolidate the teachers' position more strongly on council and regarded the current Departmental policy of the president of council being required to be a parent member as discriminatory and maintained that teachers should also be eligible for election..

In terms of a career path, it is now a requirement of teachers applying for an executive position to demonstrate ability in communicating and negotiating with parents and community groups. Furthermore, in the

current unstable political-economic climate it is crucial for schools to strengthen their alliance with parents on councils and, if possible, to have that alliance more broadly based with the parents of all their students. It seems, therefore, that the task ahead for schools is to explore a range of strategies for reaching out to parents in order to reduce social distance between parents and teachers and to develop social networks which may strengthen their associations, including the development of a variety of ways of educating parents on all aspects of schools' operation. Given the current Departmental policy on obtaining increased parental participation in schools, there should be resources made available to schools for parent education at the school level.

The short term effects of such initiatives would be greater understanding by parents of conditions in schools and greater support for teachers. The long term implications may be a more critical parent body with whom teachers will need to negotiate and work. The lack of parent education implies the continuation of the status quo. School councils may, however, be pushed by the Department to play a more prominent part in school based decision making, a move which will be

welcomed by those councillors aspiring for participation in a wider range of decisions than currently practiced. Without parent education this will mean parents taking part from a position of being poorly informed.

[Support for the conduct of this study by the Department of School Education in the North West Region of NSW is gratefully acknowledged]

References

- Ball, S.J. 1987. *The Micro-Politics of the School*. London, Methuen.
- Boston, K. 1993. *Leadership Management and Governance of Schools in NSW During the 1990's*. Paper presented at Metropolitan North School Council Symposium, NSW Department of School education.
- Federation of P and C Associations of NSW 1988. *P and C Submission to the NSW Minister of Education and Youth Affairs Concerning School Councils*. Sydney, Federation of P and C Associations of NSW.
- Fitzgerald, R.T. and Pettit, D.W. 1978. *The New School Councils*. Burwood, Victoria, Burwood State College.
- Iannacone, L. 1975. *Educational Policy Systems*. Fort Lauderdale, Fl., Nova University Press.
- Managment Review, 1989. *Schools Renewal*. Milsons Point, NSW Education Review.
- Marshall, C. and Scribner, J.D. 1991. "It's All Political" *Inquiry Into the Micropolitics of Education, Education and Urban Society*, 23(4), 347-355.
- NSW Government, 1989. *Report of the Committee of Review of NSW Schools*. Sydney, NSW Government.
- Pettit, D. 1980. *Opening Up Schools. School; and Community in Australia*. Ringwood, Vic., Penguin.
- Soliman, I.K. 1991. *State Control and Parent Participation: Analysis of Recent Reports*, *Australian Educational Researcher*, 18(1), 53-73.

* * * * *