

DECENTRALISATION, CHANGE REACTIONS AND COMMUNITY COMMITMENT

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In this paper, we focus on Queensland Department of Education initiatives inducing rights for school community members to participate in school decision-making. Situating these moves within the matrix between home and school, we adopt Michel Foucault's (1991) notion of 'governmentality', which can be translated as state intervention into all aspects of life for the purposes of optimisation of the population, utilising existing technologies and measurable resources. We highlight how participatory action research (Foot-Whyte, 1991) was used as the means of negotiating aspirations between stakeholders for a particular school.

Other Australian states have experienced local school-based management, or the 'devolution' process over longer periods of time than Queensland, and these processes have resulted in greater demands, in both time and money, on parents and school communities" (Martino, 1995, p. 3). However, for some Queensland parents who wanted more say and involvement in their child's education, the experience has been different. The main focus of this paper will be to discuss the motivations and experiences of some of the parent members of a school community in their attempts to become part of these new Queensland government initiatives of increased participation in schooling. In this, we will attempt to convey some messages of the difficulties some parents had in understanding what it means to participate in schools and in understanding the process of change that a school must experience when moving from one cultural paradigm concerning parent participation in education and schooling, to another. The degree of incomprehension between 'policy rhetoric' and 'practices on the ground' will be demonstrated.

In an associated paper (McKibbin 1995), some problems associated with the implementation of new social reform programmes at the chalkface will be contrasted with existing theoretical positions. It will try to explain why some of the difficulties were

experienced, describing social programmes with their mixture of expertise and advocacy. The 'ideal' of participation will be contrasted with some realities, such as the various civic duties and capacities of the stakeholders.

The Queensland Department of Education policy context

In late 1985, the Queensland State Education Department initiated a senior schooling conferencing process which led to the release of the policy document: The corporate vision for senior schooling in Queensland, (Department of Education, Queensland, 1989). The Department then established a collaborative and consultative development process for devising a

senior schooling curriculum framework that would take into account Queensland priorities and directions in relation to national and international reports and statements on senior secondary schooling. At this time, current national and state-wide education policy initiatives were beginning to take account of industry and business requirements for employees, particularly in relation to school leavers. Education delivery was in the process of changing to focus on abilities that could be categorised as essential learnings and key competencies, and the trend towards high retention rates in schools at year 12 had reopened the debate between general and vocational education (See Finn, 1991; Mayer, 1992 & Carmichael, 1992).

These national and state-wide programmes aimed towards senior schooling converged with other Queensland educational reform programmes, which included the Queensland Department of Education's initiatives on increased school community participation. The current moves of the Department of Education from a centralised system of management to that of more decentralised mechanisms within Queensland now included making parents co-decision-makers in schools. These moves highlight the relationship between the home, the school, the economy and the social well being of the individual within the population, that is, how the school and its community are part of the governmental processes. This governmental nexus between schools, family and state was grounded in the equity initiatives of the 1970s and was exemplified in the Karmel Report (Australian Schools Commission, 1973, p. 23), which emphasised the role of the family and stated that "...schools can influence, but alone cannot determine, educational outcomes".

These government initiatives drew a response from some parents who wished to be able to play a stronger role in the 'education journey' of their children, if only to convey what their children's education meant to them. This response was

particularly important for parents because adolescence was a time when students wished to become more independent of family ties, but were encountering increased difficulties through increased competition for tertiary places and limited avenues of meaningful employment.

The devolution of Queensland's schooling system from traditional centralised management to decentralised management with parent involvement in decision making, had two main elements. The first is co-ordinated strategies which enable established national goals of education to be directed to local authorities via school-based administration. The second is an accountability factor informing these initiatives. The parent involvement in schooling, being just one aspect of these reforms, can be seen as a composite of familial obligation, 'governmental' objectives, pastoral imperatives, and 'political' action.

These new reforms were introduced in two reports released by the Queensland government: Focus on Schools (Department of Education, Queensland, 1990a) and Focus on the Learner (Department of Education, Queensland, 1990b). Focus on the Learner identified the importance of partnerships: "Senior schooling will be most successful for students when worthwhile partnerships are forged between students, teachers, parents and community." (p. 4). Focus on Schools stated: "... Australian teachers are now expected to assume greater responsibility for curriculum development to meet the local needs of their schools,

the issue of participation. The publication stated:

All members of a democratic society are entitled to participate in the education system. The public education system, therefore, needs to promote the right of school communities to participate, and to provide suitable consultative mechanisms and procedures to facilitate this process. (Department of Education, Queensland, 1990a, p. 39)

The Queensland Department of Education's policy manual (Queensland Department of Education, 1992, Section 1) stated:

- (1) It is the Department of Education's policy to devolve greater responsibility to schools through the process of school-based decision making.
- (2) In devolving responsibility to schools, the Department of Education is conscious of the need to ensure that school-based decision-making is as effective, efficient and socially just as possible.
- (3) Each school is accountable to its own school community and through the government, to the general public. Collaborative School Development Planning and Review is an important component of this process.

In respect to this, the current Minister for Education claimed that the Queensland government was "... undertaking the greatest encouragement of parental and community participation in schools ever seen in Queensland." (Comben, 1993, p. 33). The Queensland Department of Education's Corporate Plan for 1994-1998 (Director-General of Education, 1993) affirmed this stance and suggested that parents would be integral to these reforms. It stated that schools would be empowered to manage their affairs through the delegation of further responsibility. The plan posited that wide representation of community views in school decision-making processes can have a positive effect on the learning outcomes of children and that it is every principal's responsibility to promote and support genuine parent participation activities in his or her school. The plan concludes by stating: "I see the practical implementation of this participation as a major task for principals in the coming year." (Director-General of Education, 1993, p. 5).

The 1994 budget of the Queensland Department of Education provided money for (a) activities to skill parents for participation in school management; and (b) employment of Parent Development Officers to work with parents. When writing about 'School Based Management' and reform of the state school system, Queensland's current Director-General of Education stated (Peach, 1994, p. 9):

One of the main thrusts of the current movement to reform state school systems in Australia is the move towards school-based management. School-based management is about the delegation of power away from a centralised bureaucracy to schools and communities. The push for school-based management is not unique to Queensland nor is it a recent development. Movements towards school-based management can be found in all Australian States and Territories.

However, our interest in this paper is in the quote within the Focus on Schools (Department of Education, Queensland, 1990a, p. 39) document which stated:

All members of a democratic society are entitled to participate in the education system. The public education system, therefore, needs to promote the right of school

communities to participate, and to provide suitable consultative mechanisms and procedures to facilitate this process.

Our concern is to unlock the utopian aspirations within this quote and contrast them with some realities from case-study material of parent participation in one Queensland state high school, and in

so doing, demonstrate the degree of incomprehension between 'practices on the ground' and 'policy rhetoric'.

The parent project

The parent project initially included teachers and students in years 11 and 12, along with the administrators of the school, the parents of the students and university researchers. However, when it was decided to survey all the stakeholders within the school community, the project broadened to include all teachers, students and parents at the school. This included four senior administrative staff, eighty plus teachers, over eleven hundred students, and approximately eight hundred parents/guardians. The school's mission was "to develop confident, self-directed knowledgeable persons who are morally and socially responsible, employable, capable of enjoying life, and prepared for further learning". It also stressed that the school had a care program to encourage a close liaison between the school and home.

The study began with an initial survey called the Parent Survey, which focused on parents' and guardians' perceptions of the school and their participatory role in the school (see McKibbin, Cooper, Arcodia & Doig, 1994). The Parent Survey followed on from a Student Survey which focused on students' perceptions of Hillsdale (see Arcodia, Cooper, Doig & McKibbin, 1994). The survey was sent back and forth across the senior school and university staff members for comment and modification. We targeted the non-English speaking background students through their co-ordinator, and the current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students through their support officer. The parent questionnaire was sent out in late September via students during Home Group. Notices were placed in the weekly school newsletter and teachers were alerted to hand out and collect surveys via the school's morning notices. Phone calls were made over several days at the end of the year to gather as many anonymous surveys as possible. Often, parents were either not home, or home phone numbers were incorrect.

By the end of the school year, we had received 367 Parent Surveys. The Principal had calculated that there were approximately 700 parent/guardian sets. However, some administrative staff calculated the total to be more like 900 families. This averaged out to approximately 800 family sets. The Parent Survey responses showed that school parents and guardians agreed that a strong home/school partnership was essential for positive student educational outcomes - 62% of responding parents agreed that they wanted more involvement in school activities. Nevertheless, responses also indicated that 79% had no involvement. Comments have been frequently made by some parents and school staff that this lack of involvement is caused by the disbursement of the student/parent population

across 162 Brisbane suburbs, a situation found from the Student Survey responses (see Arcodia et al, 1994). Student Survey responses on student and parent residential demographics, however, have also indicated that the majority of respondents lived within a five to ten kilometre radius of the school, a

distance that should allow parent participation.

Those parents/guardians who were interested in any further discussions of issues relating to the survey were able to register their names and phone numbers on the tear-off section. Forty parents registered their names. Invitations were sent out accordingly to those parents/guardians by the Deputy Principal. Thirty-two accepted the invitation and twenty actually attended the meeting, along with three university personnel, four school administration personnel and one teacher.

After the parents were given an opportunity to discuss survey results, four key issues were raised by these participants for ongoing discussion. They included:

- (1) that there was negative peer pressure at the school that induced non-achievement (and that this was categorised by disruptive classes, poor study habits and may require a shared approach to discipline between home/school);
- (2) problems in communication between parents and the school (particularly with respect to counselling re subject selection, homework, and teacher expectations);
- (3) the need to extend the hours that the school and school library is open; and
- (4) the need for more information on School Advisory Councils and School Boards.

At this first parent/guardian meeting, it became obvious that there were competing imperatives at stake within the setting. Although attempts were made on several occasions to co-opt the 'non-English speaking background' community, plus the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community into participating more fully in the Parent Survey, it appeared that their responses were minimal. None of these people registered their willingness to take any of the issues further by attending the first meeting. Hence, although this meeting was arranged democratically giving everyone a chance to participate, one teacher commented that this group was 'not representative of the whole school community', as no Asian or Aboriginal parents were in attendance. This is a typical instance of limitations based in political rationality, whereby all members of the community were encouraged to participate. Of those parents who did attend, although they all appeared to represent the dominant Anglo-Saxon racial groupings of the school, it became obvious that they were not a unified group. In discussion of the survey results, some

parents disagreed that their opinions were in the minority. Resolving which issues should be isolated for further discussion and agreement became lengthy and unwieldy, even though four main categories were listed. Attempts to make a future time to meet with all group members also became an obstacle to smooth organisation, as all parents had different availability times.

Similarly, within the structure of this high school, with eighty or so teachers each with their different methods, ideals, personalities and subjects to teach, there existed no single unified group of school personnel. Any attempt to introduce new methods of parental involvement within school decision-making, therefore, could be difficult. To begin to take local responsibility for curriculum policy development with all these people to consider seemed a sensitive task indeed. The research method adopted as a means to negotiate and network across the diverse terrains of home, school and university, was based on the 'Participatory Action Research' (PAR) model (Foote-Whyte, 1991). The university researcher collaborating with the parents is the

first author. She was a parent at the school also.

The participatory action research activity

Participatory action research became the means of trying to find some 'equilibrium' between varying stakeholders' expectations and positions. The parent/researcher visited parents and interacted with school administration. The Parent Survey results and the issues prioritised at the November meeting, and subsequent informal meetings of interested parents (together with their outcomes), became the basis for the on-going action research study. Invitations were sent out to all forty parents, and to all administrative and teaching staff at the school for continuing discussions at a new meeting. However, only a handful of parents (six) attended this meeting, with some teachers, a Head of Department, and the new acting principal (the school's original Principal had been seconded to Regional Office).

The new acting principal was initially supportive of the parent meeting as he felt that the dynamics of the meeting were different from the more formal Parents' and Citizens' meeting he had previously attended. He greeted the Parent Survey with glee, as it could be useful information for the Collaborative School Review (CSR) which was due in semester two. Hence, even though the attendance at this meeting had been disappointing, there was a feeling of progress after the first four months of the project. However, some negative influences began to emerge. Most discussion by participants at the February meeting centred on

varied conceptions of "communication". Communication between parents and school staff, however, was not the only concern; communication between the parent body itself became a factor to be addressed.

Because of the poor parent attendance, the next parent meeting was at a parent's house and was used as a time for consolidation, learning and decision making, particularly with respect to the level that parents wished to commit to their participation. The agenda was planned so that there was reflection time. The parents were asked to take stock of their situation with respect to active parent participation and reflections on ways to address the parent concerns. The meeting included a discussion, led by the parent/researcher on participatory action research. The parents were informed that the participatory action research methodology encourages all participants to become researchers. The parent/researcher ensured that parents realise that future directions of the project were theirs to determine, and this would depend on their commitment, as well as what they wanted to do. In other words, it was made evident to the parents that it was no use developing the means by which they could actively participate within the school, if they were not serious about it. Because the parent/researcher had been initially responsible for the Parent Survey and its consequent follow-up, (such as sending out invitations to parents to attend meetings to address issues prioritised), the meeting at the parent's home was used as an opportunity to encourage parents to take a greater level of responsibility for the project. This appeared to be successful. The ten parents and one student in attendance appeared very positive about the discussion and the prospect of using the participatory action research methodology. They committed themselves to being active in the project. As a first step, they

decided to become more informed of the new government policy initiatives on parent participation in schooling.

The parent/researcher now worked collaboratively with this parent group on building participation in the activities of the school. The parents in the group attended the regular school Parents' and Citizens' committee meetings and spoke up on issues of concern. They phoned each other weekly and organised (with some help) their own monthly meetings to address some of the survey issues. However, they began to feel that their participation in the formal structures of the school was ineffectual, and that the school was not interested in the issues they raised, particularly if these were related to educational issues. They also felt that, although there were pockets of parent activities, there was no 'whole school' approach to

improving parent participation. They were referred to by some school personnel as 'a splinter group'. These parents began to get the impression that participation was, for them, a 'closed shop'. As one parent recalled:

I've been a parent at the school for five years but I've never been invited once to a social, even fundraising, which I find incredible. So there's this very closed school to parent activity per se, where I have found this to be 'the norm' at other schools, at least socially.

The parents began to search for ways in which their concerns could be heard or in which they could have an effect. This had two results. First, the parents began to plan activities for the school. Second, they became more attracted to the Parents' and Citizens' committee as it was the main school structure for handling parent issues. The first initiative of the group was to organise a place in the school where parents could gather and have a coffee and conversation. The school was approached and a space in a staff room was offered. A working bee cleared the space and a fridge, coffee making facilities, chairs and a table were placed in the space. The second initiative was a social activity to involve parents, students and teachers, which was to be based on curricula activities at the school. This was to be organised by a working party of teachers, students and parents. Again, this was supported by the school but, as the date of the event neared, it became a point of contention between the organising parents and some school community members. However, the event ran with the support of students, parents and teachers, and was a success on the night.

The third initiative was a request that the Parents' and Citizens' committee form subgroups to act on educational issues which concerned parents. This was not seen as possible, and the parent group received no action on the matter. As a result of the difficulties associated with more parental involvement, the idea of training sessions to skill parents in meeting procedures, communication and negotiation with school personnel and other parents was raised. A teacher and the parent/researcher applied for Department of Education funding to run a 'parent skilling' workshop for parents from this and surrounding schools. The focus of the workshop was to bridge gaps between "the ideal" of effective parental participation and "the reality". The workshop was designed to cover the following: how to replace emotional judgements with rational objective decision-making; an understanding of current policy documents which impact on education; building confidence through effective participation in school-based decision making; and developing creative partnership

with teachers, administrators and students. Parents were invited

to attend one whole-day training session on a Saturday, with a follow-up workshops on a week night to respond to further needs identified by the group. The workshop was very successful in terms of attendance and the interest shown by parents and Department of Education parent participation support and training officers.

However, the parent group still continued to feel opposition from members of the school community. The impression was that the school was almost immovable to such reform programmes of parent participation. This the parents found difficult to understand, as they now knew that parent participation was being actively promoted state-wide by the Department of Education. The parents continued their pressure for more parental say. To overcome the impasse, the parent group decided to adopt, at the suggestion of a visitor, an 'entry-ist' approach in seeking ways to address their concerns. In other words, the parent group decided to look for 'structural' and more acceptable ways to enter the organisational processes of the school. The most obvious way was the Parents' and Citizens' committee. The impending Collaborative School Review (CSR) offered another opportunity to participate and a meeting of parents interested in the Review was called. However, when the acting principal appeared to address this meeting as that of a 'splinter group', because it was not an official Parents' and Citizens' meeting, the parents became increasingly despondent about the project and their relationship with school staff. The school did not appear interested in communicating with parents on issues related to the Parent Survey, nor did they appear to have time to be pro-active in the area of raising the awareness of parent participation (even though this was widely promoted through various sections of the Department of Education).

The parents did not give up. They organised, with further assistance, a series of meetings at the parent meeting area in the school, where ideas could be canvassed and plans formulated in an attempt to be 'included'. The parents felt that their only hope was to take on an 'official' voice, and so they decided to adopt a more assertive and political stance. Some of the parent group decided to be nominated for official Parents' and Citizens' committee executive positions, although they had never found these formal meetings palatable before, and never wanted to attend them. The Annual General Meeting of the Parents' and Citizens' committee was chaired by the original Principal, who had returned from secondment. He commented on a much larger than usual attendance, where voting had to be held for most positions. There were two nominations for President, three nominations for Vice President, one for Secretary, two for Treasurer, and two nominations for Queensland Council of Parents' and Citizens' Association representatives.

The parent group nominees were successful in the election, and their efforts to become involved parents in the school now had more official sanction. As a result, some subcommittees were formed to look at educational issues. The position of Parent Liaison Worker was proposed for the school. As well, two weeks after the Annual General Meeting, a 'Welcome Back 1995' social occasion for the teachers of the school was arranged, which was a successful, informal gathering of parents and teachers. However, at this time, the principal was transferred from the school permanently and a new acting principal held the position until a

permanent principal was appointed.

The new permanent principal arrived. The initial impression was that he is well informed on the Departmental initiatives concerning parents. There is a feeling that he is trying to instil a sense of security for parents through explanations of their position in relation to the school. He has outlined the principal's official position in relation to accountability, as well as an explanation of the parent role in relation to decision-making. Parents feel that he is attempting to treat their desire to participate in the school with respect. He models a style of leadership and uses management strategies which include parents.

Reflections

The pluralist values and views within educational institutions became quite obvious, but frustrating over time. There were different principals engaging with the school community, all with their varying positions on inviting parents into the school. There were variations in parental competencies to handle 'formal' meeting sessions and school policy decision-making. There were divergent parent ideologies regarding rights to participate. These matters made successful parent participation quite complicated.

In a following presentation (McKibbin, 1995), the parent/researcher will endeavour to address some of the difficulties experienced by parents in their attempts to participate. However, this paper deserves some immediate reflection. The parent/researcher looks back over the two years: Over a period of two years of the project, parents have had to respond to four different personnel in the position of school principal. Two of these were acting in the position. From our initial Parent Survey and the list of issues to be dealt with, it became obvious that the parent voice within

the school was not very well developed. In an effort to resolve some of the survey issues, parents who had the time and interest in pursuing these interests continued to find the appropriate structures to deal with them. Usually, the parent/researcher who held the survey information contacted interested parents by telephone or by letter to inform of meeting times and proposed agendas. However, over a period of six months, it became obvious that the interested parents diminished in number. Only six continued to run with the baton. Their concerns which centred around survey results initially, changed over time to concerns of seemingly being 'kept at a distance'. This then became the means of galvanising the group. Old forms of established organisation were being challenged both inside by some teachers and parents, and outside by School Support Centre personnel, Parent Development Officers, QCPCA members, Regional Office personnel and the Education Department generally, through various policy initiatives. However, rarely did these changes reach the chalk face, or if they did, they appeared to be somewhat resisted. Increased awareness and acceptance of parental involvement and their 'legitimate' concerns in the form of open and honest communication from school personnel, did not appear in depth however, until a new, permanent principal arrived.

It is also useful to note the parent perceptions. A selection of reflections from five parents who were active in the project is given below:

Parent 1: The main issue has always been for me the resistance to any suggestions or ideas put forward by parents, because we are just parents.

Parent 2: In stark contrast, it was so easy to speak at an informal meeting of parents at a parent's home - where everyone felt comfortable in talking freely about the issues concerning them in a lively, relaxed way. This day crystallised for me one of the main barriers to parent participation in High Schools - how can we preserve the ideas and ideals that arise with the ease of parents simply talking together "about their students", when it becomes necessary to communicate these same ideas in more formal settings of Parents and Citizens' meetings, school forums etc.?

Parent 3: Somehow when my child left primary school to enter high school, I had lost touch. I didn't feel that comfortable contact that I had felt at the primary level. The school wasn't just up the road anymore, parents didn't

pick up and drop of their children anymore and therefore didn't get to know other parents. There were no longer opportunities to group and work in the classroom with all the children in my daughter's class, which had always given me an insight into what was happening in the school and a close relationship with her teachers. There was no school fete, where we all pulled together to raise funds for something which would improve our children's school and therefore, their education. There weren't Easter hat parades or Book Week displays. Apart from the traditional areas of canteen and uniform shop, the school felt closed. It was very different. It was like a foreign country.

Parent 4: As a result of frequent and friendly interchanges with other members of the P&C, as well as members of the CSR Review teams, my knowledge of school structures and their "lines of leadership" increased dramatically. From that of (1) parents having a valuable role in the decision making process of school life, to realising that this role, at best, was a superficial one, and at worst, was a token gesture. I then came to realise even in mid 1990's, things had not changed markedly from my own experiences at secondary school, that is parents were welcome for their financial and/or their support with fund raising, transport, activities, etc, but never into the "inner sanctum" of decision making within the school.

Parent 5: The barriers that you cannot move are the worst - you cannot move them because they are more or less invisible - they are part of the establishment. 'Yes! but we've tried that before and it didn't work. Yes! But we'll have to do this, and do that'. Probably the most deterring barrier, but not the most obvious, is the fact that parents are not 'qualified' from the viewpoint of the majority of persons employed by the Department. If a parent is to become part of the school community, the role of a parent needs to be made clear from the start. I know of several parents who volunteer time at the school, but end up doing the tuckshop

tour. I can recall one department who needed a "volunteer". I was told that they used to have a parent who was really good at photocopying but unfortunately the parent liked to talk so it just didn't work out. I can understand this aspect of having parental involvement, but surely this goes back to proper management techniques and a valuing and tolerance of differences? It made me feel that I was acceptable because I knew my place.

However, in spite of the 'top-down' reform initiatives, this

participatory action research project, which involved parental educational expectations and participation in schooling, revealed that there were unexpected difficulties associated with new governmental reforms. One of the major findings of the project was an ambivalence by some principals, teachers and more traditional parents, towards parents being interested in educational issues and involved in assisting in the management of schools.

Policy Implications

The experience of this project shows that the rhetoric of Queensland's new initiatives of increased participation by parents in schooling may be highly inflated and misleading. The study indicates that there are many obstacles to achieving success. Some obstacles may be associated with the time that change requires - it seems evident to the observer that teachers are stressed and working at their limit, and it is true that 'democratic' school-based decision making necessitates holding more meetings, particularly at times suitable to parents. Some school personnel appeared to perceive parents as unprofessional and unaccountable to the system. Although they are supposed to have skill in this area, some staff appeared to have no effective skilling in dealing with parents in these new school based management procedures. There appeared at first, to be no systematic approach to incorporate parents easily into the school's management processes. Even when this did occur, some parents thought it appeared tokenistic. Parents are left wondering why they spend so much 'volunteer' time on issues which didn't appear to be followed through.

Nevertheless, parents have been invited into decision-making for accountability reasons, among others. The Department of Education no longer has the old inspectorial system of observation, and parents could be considered to have become another means of keeping accountability levels high within the local arena. Even so, some interstate parents have leaflets distributed to them at their Parents' and Citizens' monthly meetings, warning them that they must not discuss the conduct of school personnel, due to legal ramifications such as defamation. Everyone, it seems, treads a fine line within new policy initiatives.

The competing rights and varying positions of stakeholders such as the principal, the teacher, the parent and the student, do not fit neatly into the sentence from Focus on Schools (1990): 'All members of a democratic society are entitled to participate in the education system'. This case-study shows then that there is a difference between an 'in-principle' entitlement and the capacities to participate.

Nevertheless, this paper celebrates the emancipatory

effectiveness of the research methodology of participatory action research, and recognises how these parents became ethically formed (in a different way for different purposes). That is, in becoming more official members of the school community, they developed different capacities, which were associated with their new responsibilities. The personal growth experienced by these parents was a result of their collaborative action research activities.

Action research is about learning. It involves us in active, open-ended and vigorous reflection upon our work and its consequences. Doing action research requires us to draw upon our own resources, individual and mutual, as experienced practitioners. It is an attractive process because it has to do not only with the production of knowledge for its own sake (though it has a contribution to make in that respect), nor with identifying technical improvements in our job (though it can help us understand the preconditions of "good practice"); it also has to do with emancipation (Field, 1992, p. ix).

Participatory action research highlighted for us how school change processes can come about, albeit slowly. It became the tool by which previously silent voices commenced making noises. Real sharing was unlikely unless parents were empowered to assert their rights in their relationships with managers and teachers. This was problematic, however, unless parents also acquired knowledge of school structures and procedures, skills in communication and negotiation, the courage to stand firm in their position, but most of all, for success, they need a position which can be recognised by the school and be held accountable within the educational bureaucracy.

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