Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

'We've changed the rules now': Counting and accounting for social justice in the devolved school

Peter McInerney

Flinders University

MCI02079

Paper presented at the

Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE)

Annual Conference, Brisbane, 1-5 December 2002

Correspondence:

Dr Peter McInerney

Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching

School of Education Flinders University

GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, SA, 5001

Email: peter.mcinerney@flinders.edu.au

Australian Association for Research in Education
Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002

Abstract

How does a self-managing school meet the needs and aspirations of the most disenfranchised members of its community? What responsibilities should reside with the state and the education centre in the quest for more equitable schooling outcomes? This paper explores the nexus between school-based management and socially just schooling through an analysis of recent qualitative studies undertaken by the Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching. In the neo-liberal state a discourse on social justice-if it exists at all-is couched in language of 'parental choice', 'diversity' and 'equity standards'. As centralised bureaucracies have been reduced to 'administrative husks' (Seddon, 1995), responsibility for addressing educational disadvantage has largely been devolved to schools through global budgeting arrangements and indices of disadvantage. For its part, the state has delimited its responsibilities to the development of policy frameworks, funding formula and accountability mechanisms in the guise of curriculum outcomes, standardised testing regimes and performance appraisal processes. However, there are disturbing signs that these new counting and accounting measures are not working in the interests of the most marginalised students and their families; that, in the final analysis, far too much depends on the integrity and hard work of principals, teachers and local communities to enact socially just curriculum. With reference to one school community, this paper highlights the struggles and tensions of those engaged in school-based reforms for more equitable schooling outcomes and points to the need for a socially just bureaucracy that complements a socially just approach to local school management.

'We've changed the rules now': Counting and accounting for social justice in the devolved school

Introduction

> In the first week of the term we got this wondrous letter saying 'We've changed the rules now. We are not going to base it on the 2000 resource profile; we're going to build a resource profile on approximate numbers for 2001. We will factor in what you probably would have got in your Commonwealth literacy grants, what you probably would have got in your school support grants. Rather than what you really did get in 2000, we'll actually do an approximate of what you might get in 2001 and we'll use that as the benchmark for the global budget.' (Principal)

These are the words of an exasperated principal whose staffing plans have been thrown into disarray as a consequence of last minute changes to funding guidelines. The rules are indeed changing when it comes to funding arrangements for public schools. In times of dwindling resources, an accelerated shift towards a more devolved education system has brought a new language of resource management and financial accountability into school communities. Principals, administrators and school councillors now have to tangle with 'global budgets', 'resource profiles', 'asset management plans', 'operational plans', 'service agreements', and a swag of internal and external monitoring processes that seem more at home in business organisations than in schools. New mathematical formulae, in the form of benchmarks, indices, levels and standards, are being used to: allocate funds to schools; determine degrees of educational disadvantage; decide how much school space each student may occupy and report on learning outcomes. 'Counting' and 'accounting' for social justice and educational outcomes have become dominant themes in neo-liberal times.

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

But the rules are changing in more substantive ways than the rationalisation of funding formulae. The current reform agenda has led to a new set of arrangements for addressing matters of equity and educational disadvantage that pose serious threats to the possibility of public education making a real difference for the most marginalised students. Now more than ever it seems that the local school, rather than the education system, is to be the locus for action to enact curriculum that is responsive to the community, to support students in poverty, and to take prime responsibility for the educational outcomes of students. But can schools do this alone? What responsibilities should reside with the public education system and the state?

In this 'work in progress' paper, I want to examine the ways in which social justice is being reconceptualised in the context of a devolving school system and consider the impact of current policies on 'disadvantaged' school communities. I use the term 'disadvantaged' with some reservation, given its deficit connotations in some circles, but it still remains a powerful descriptor of educational inequality for those working in Disadvantaged School Project (DSP) communities. I begin by mapping contemporary shifts in education policy and then I look more specifically at the South Australian context and the current fiscal arrangements and governance principles for addressing educational inequalities and improving parental participation under local school management. With reference to a school community, which has a high proportion of indigenous students, I then describe the struggles and tensions of those engaged in school-based reforms for more equitable schooling outcomes. In particular, I describe a shift in thinking and acting from a bureaucratic notion of justice to a relational form that is more attuned to the realities of students' lives and the complexities of the local community. Finally, I present an argument in support of the need for a socially just bureaucracy that complements a socially just approach to local school management.

Two major qualitative studies have informed the analysis:

- A report prepared for the South Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Advisory Committee (SAAETAC) by the Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching, which documented Aboriginal parents' participation in school decision-making and more specifically their understandings of Partnerships 21, a South Australian model of local school management (McInerney, Hattam & Smyth, 2002).

- An Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project conducted by the Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching (1999-2001), which investigated the impact of local school management on teachers' work in South Australian public schools.

Social justice and schooling: The policy context

Education is often perceived to be the great equaliser in an unjust society. Since the introduction of mass schooling in the mid-nineteenth century, many Australians have looked to public education as a basic right and a vehicle that will furnish them with the rewards and opportunities to experience more fulfilling and satisfying lives. There are tangible signs in the latter half of the twentieth century of Federal and State Government endeavours to ameliorate the effects of social inequalities in education: notably, the extension of universal secondary education, an expansion of university places and the provision of resources to support schools serving 'disadvantaged communities'. Nonetheless, as Thomson (2001) points out, there has never been a free and democratic public education system. Because access to education has always been at a cost to parents, schools have always favoured the rich and powerful (Connell, 1993).

Although the relationship between social justice and schooling is a complex and contested one, there is little doubt that education systems and schools have historically engaged in the

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

production of social hierarchies (Connell, 1993), and the maintenance of a hegemonic curriculum that continues to serve the interests of dominant groups through the continuance of socially exclusionary schooling practices such as zoning, streaming, inflexible pedagogical practices and discriminatory testing and examination systems (Connell, 1998). In reality, few social justice programs have seriously challenged the social and economic structures which sustain inequalities and educational disadvantage in the first place.

This is especially true for Aboriginal students and their families. Although the educational outcomes for indigenous students are showing 'encouraging signs of progress' (*National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*, 1994, p. 5), progress has been slow. In the 1990s, less than 50 per cent of indigenous children had some preschool experience, compared with a national equivalent rate of more than 90 per cent (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1993, p.1). Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students had the lowest South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) completion rates of all monitored groups, in all three years 1994 to 1996. In 1996, 36.8 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students completed SACE, compared to 59.1 per cent of all students. Being an Aboriginal student means doing extra identity work in schools. Having to do the extra emotional labour required to cope with the dissonance, misunderstanding, fear and anger is just too much of a cost for many Aboriginal students (Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson & Wurst, 2000, p. 144). Both indigenous male and females remain severely disadvantaged in terms of post-secondary qualifications with university attrition rates three times higher than the university average (Bourke & Burden, 1996, p. xv).

Today there are new threats to the social justice gains of the 1980s following the ascendancy of neo-liberal regimes and the spread of economic rationalist thinking in government social policy and education reform. In the drive towards marketisation and user-pays principles, even the idea of a 'safety net' for the most disadvantaged appears to be under challenge in some quarters. Many social commentators believe that, in the wake of economic restructuring, surging unemployment and accompanying social dislocation, Australia is becoming a more unequal and polarised society at the turn of the millennium (McGregor, 1997; Connell, 1998). Apart from the economic indicators, there are disturbing signs of cultural rifts within Australian society, following the failure of the current Federal Government to advance reconciliation with indigenous peoples, renewed attacks on the efficacy of multiculturalism and a new wave of racism in the wake of Australia's border protection policy and recent terrorist attacks.

What we are now witnessing is a market-driven approach to education characterised by a culture of managerialism, an emphasis on competition and efficiency and an increasing reliance on commercial sponsorship and local school funding to maintain curriculum (Marginson, 1997; Morrow, Blackburn & Gill, 1998). This shift has been accompanied by moves towards local school management, a whittling away of support for teachers' professional development and a closing down of spaces for debates in educational bureaucracies. Despite the persistence of educational inequalities in the 1990s, social justice has effectively been expunged from the discourse on education policy-even the term has dropped out of policy texts. In its place, terms like 'parental choice' and 'equity standards' have gained currency and the notion of 'educational disadvantage' is increasingly seen in terms of individual/family/group deficits. A retreat of the state from the funding of public education and human services and a consequent shift of responsibilities to parents and school communities (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997) have led to a widening gap in the provision of educational services and outcomes across public schools. At a federal level, the debate about poverty and schooling has collapsed to literacy amidst a fetish for standardised testing and outcomes-based education.

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

Since the 1980s, most state education systems in Australia have moved towards various models of local school management. However, it would be quite inaccurate to describe this as a trend towards decentralisation. On the contrary, there is ample evidence to suggest that delegation of decision-making responsibility at the level of the individual school has also been accompanied by recentralising tendencies in the form of mandated curriculum and statewide monitoring of student achievement and teacher performance (Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998). Underscoring the rationale for local school management, however, is a rhetoric of school autonomy and parental empowerment. Although South Australia has not embraced a fully fledged market-driven approach to local school management, recent policy shifts are indicative of the shift towards a more devolved public education system.

Local school management in South Australia

South Australia has a history of local school decision-making dating back to 1970s. Initially, moves towards a more decentralised and participatory system of public education had the broad support of the education union, principals associations and parent bodies. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, devolution was often viewed by principals and teachers as a cost-cutting measure on the part of a neo-liberal state, which was more intent on implementing a managerialist and market-driven response to education than promoting genuine school autonomy. The latest model of local school management in South Australia, Partnerships 21, is underpinned by a commitment to: 'maximise the local'; 'strengthen student learning outcomes'; 'extend community partnerships'; and 'improve fairness and equity' (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 1999, p. 20). What this means in reality is a scheme that integrates a global budgeting system with a strategic planning process called 'partnerships plans' and a 'new' structure for school councils called the 'governing council'. These features have particular implications for disadvantaged school communities.

Global budgeting arrangements

The global budget is the process in which the Department for Education, Training and Employment (DETE) is devolving decision-making about the use of resources to the local level. The global budget is allocated on the basis of various mathematical formulae, which have been developed as a means of calculating a school's resource entitlement. Mostly the formulae are based on the numbers of students enrolled at various times during the school year. However, schools also receive additional money on the basis of the numbers of School Card recipients, Aboriginal students, student with disabilities, challenging behaviours, English as second language (ESL) students, open-access enrolments, and other special programs including Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Students with High Intellectual Potential (SHIP).

Following consultation with schools about the inadequacy of funding arrangements for disadvantaged school communities (Kimber, 2000), grants are also indexed according to a Rural and Isolated Students Index and an Index of Educational Disadvantage (Kimber, 2002). The index provides for differential funding for schools according to the degree of socio-economic disadvantage as indicated by Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data on family income. The most disadvantaged schools, designated category 1, receive the highest level of funding. Specifically, schools receive an additional $2 274 per Aboriginal student and an extra $500 for an Aboriginal student in a disadvantaged school. Under Partnerships 21 arrangements the Aboriginal Education Unit has lost its autonomy and the power it had to have a say in what happens to the Federal money for Aboriginal education. Mostly this money is now shifted directly to schools via the global budgeting process.

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

One of the most significant shifts has been in regards to the hiring of Aboriginal education workers (AEWs). The Aboriginal Education Unit now has only a 'signing off' capacity for AEWs who are now hired at the school level. Previously, they were hired by the Aboriginal Education Unit which was responsible for ensuring that the AEWs were provided with support and inservice. The actual resource allocation process at the school level is managed through the development of a 'partnerships plan'. This plan is developed in the context of the governing council which is the site at which the so-called partnership with the community actually takes place. Considerable faith is placed in these councils as a means of strengthening school-community dialogue and engaging parents in meaningful decision-making processes. But what of Aboriginal parents' perspectives? What measures have been taken to ensure that peripheral voices are heard?

Aboriginal parent voice in schools

There is a great deal of rhetoric about the importance of ensuring that Aboriginal parents have a voice in school decision-making. A key goal of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NAEP) is:

> To establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal parents and community members in decision making regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of preschool, primary and secondary education services for their children. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994, p. 4)

A commitment to this principle of participation is also contained in the guidelines regarding school governance in current local school management arrangements of the South Australian public education system.

> Partnerships 21 will support existing involvement and participation, but will give sites a greater opportunity to strengthen their partnerships with their communities by further developing a shared decision-making process that is empowering and representative. The voices of all groups in the community will need to be heard and recognised. Genuine partnerships will ensure that inclusive structures and processes that support such groups as parents living in poverty, parents from different linguistic backgrounds and Aboriginal parents are in place so that they can take an active part in the decision-making process. By determining the variety of perspectives within the community, the quality of decisions made at the local level will be enhanced. Community consultation will need to be actively pursued, ensuring that a range of different styles and opportunities are used. (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 1999, p. 27)

In another document, entitled *Achieving outcomes for Aboriginal students in P21 schools through Aboriginal decision making* (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2001), it is claimed that:

> Success for Aboriginal students derives from partnerships between Aboriginal communities and those who work in schools and preschools. Cultural support, recognition and acknowledgment can only be achieved by active and effective relationships between Aboriginal parents and the school community. (p. 1)

Under Partnerships 21, governing councils are responsible for setting the objectives, values and strategic goals of schools; they make decisions about global budgeting arrangements and they (together with the principal) are expected to monitor and report on funding for

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

Aboriginal students and educational outcomes as identified in the Aboriginal education plan. As indicated previously, global budgeting provisions incorporate an index of educational disadvantage with an additional allocation of funds for students with learning needs, for example, Aboriginal students, students with disabilities, English as a second language, socio-economic disadvantage (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 1999). In view of these resource implications, there are very compelling reasons why Aboriginal parents should be well informed about the principles and practices underlying Partnerships 21 and well represented on the governing councils that make decisions about the distribution of resources to children in their care.

Much is made of the potential of Partnerships 21 to facilitate greater participation of Aboriginal people in school decision-making and there have been several Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) initiatives to promote this goal. Prominent among these has been the formation of affiliated committees of the governing council in P21 schools. Known as *Yurrekaityarindi* (a Kaurna word meaning 'ear encircled'), these committees are to be recognised as the formal groups for advice and communication between Aboriginal parents, the school and the community. According to policy guidelines (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2000), *Yurrekaityarindi* should reflect the diversity of Aboriginal families; a majority must be parents or caregivers; other community members may be represented; Aboriginal members may serve on the governing council; the committee may be set up using federally funded Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) committee members and structures.

One of the major claims of the latest model of local school management is that disadvantaged school communities will benefit materially from a differential allocation of resources designed to ensure that all students can achieve 'the standards of the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework, and . . . gain access to pathways that best assist in their development and success' (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 1999, p. 23). Indeed, the promise of additional funds appears to have been one of the major incentives for DSP schools to join Partnerships 21.

But has local school management delivered on its promises? Does the practice match the rhetoric? In exploring these questions, I now refer to a case study of a school community that is struggling with some significant issues of educational disadvantage. After outlining the contextual features of the school and current community concerns, I describe curriculum responses to social injustices, especially those which address the needs of indigenous students. Finally, I consider the extent to which funding and governance arrangements under local school management are likely to enhance school-community relationships and improve educational outcomes for students.

The following account has been developed from research that incorporates interviews with teachers, parents, Aboriginal education workers (AEWs) and school services officers (SSOs) as well as observations of school meetings and classroom teaching practices.

Counting and accounting for social justice at Kangaroo Flat

A snapshot of the school community

Kangaroo Flat is the pseudonym for a small neighbourhood school (CPC-7) in a rural service centre. Indigenous students make up approximately half of the school population and there is a growing number of recently arrived students of Italian, Turkish, Vietnamese and other non-English speaking backgrounds. Kangaroo Flat is classified as a category 1 school under the Educational Index of Disadvantage. Approximately 90 per cent of school families are recipients of the School Card and a large proportion of students are on negotiated

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

curriculum plans (NCPs). The local community is characterised by high levels of unemployment, welfare dependency and transience-factors which impact on school enrolment patterns and educational programs. Many Aboriginal families live on the margins of poverty and this, coupled with entrenched racist attitudes and behaviours, reinforces the level of educational disadvantage. A recent health survey revealed that 80 per cent of students come to school with an incomplete breakfast or nothing at all.

The school attracts many indigenous students from within and outside the immediate neighbourhood. According to our parent informants, it had a reputation for good educational programs for Aboriginal students. They spoke of 'a family atmosphere', 'a dedicated principal' and 'teachers who were willing to tackle the really hard issues'. There was a view that Aboriginal kids would be disadvantaged if they moved to another school.

> I live just out of town. I could send my children to any school . . . but I chose this school because I think it's more down-to-earth . . . they're not pretending to be something they're not . . . it's a big family. Even though there are people who think it's a bad school, there are kids who are just blooming here. (Parent)

Public affirmation of indigenous culture and heritage was reflected in murals on school buildings and in a Naming Wall, that had been built by the community as a Centenary of Federation Project. The school supported the education of indigenous students through the provision of an Aboriginal education room, a homework centre run by Aboriginal parents and an indigenous language program which utilised resources from a community cultural centre. An Aboriginal education teacher (AET) and Aboriginal education workers (AEWs) played a pivotal role in mediating relationships between the school and Aboriginal families, providing learning support for indigenous students and bringing Aboriginal perspectives to the curriculum. An AEW summed up the work as follows:

> We do a lot of one-on-one support for kids and also we build up trust and personal relationships with the students themselves. Once you get the relationship there the kids are more inclined to learn and listen. Then when you speak to them about academic issues with their reading and their maths . . . you are able to get their attention. (AEW)

Community issues

In spite of a well-deserved reputation for its educational programs, the school had to constantly rail against small-town talk and damaging stereotyping of sole parents and dysfunctional families.

> I've got [neighbours] who say 'Oh well, we won't go to Kangaroo Flat because we've heard that that's not a good school'. And I say 'Well, that's rubbish'. It is a good school but people are almost told immediately they enter the town that it's not. (Parent)

> We are trying to get rid of this image which unfortunately in small towns if you're stamped with that it doesn't matter what you try to do. Often you can't shake it. We have been trying to have that positive feedback into the community that we have got a few problems here but a lot of the schools have got problems as well. But our numbers are climbing up again now. (Teacher)

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

An intrusion of violent behaviour into the school had exacerbated community concerns. With declining school enrolments and negative perceptions, the school was caught up in the business of promoting its educational programs or, as we were told, 'selling the school to the community'. This was reflected in a school priority: 'to make Kangaroo Flat School the preferred school for families living in the local area'. Dwindling enrolments had led to fears of school closure, a matter that had surfaced in a review of education in the district. To compound the problem, a review of the school's land and resources by an assets management team had led to the removal of a building and diminished teaching/learning areas. Meanwhile parent/teacher concerns about literacy standards had led to calls for a 'back-to-basics' response to literacy.

A focus on literacy

The school's three-year strategic plan accorded greatest priority to improvements in literacy, numeracy and information technology communication (ITC) skills, the development of cooperative behaviours and a violence-free environment and a community involvement program. Initially, the school developed a literacy program under the *Health Promoting School* banner, with an emphasis on a Freirean notion of contextual learning as a means of empowering children in poverty. This program was developed around issues and topics identified by teachers and children.

> All our language programs started out from a problem base of 'what concerns you about living in your community? . . . and what do you think you can do about it?' Kids used to come up with amazing issues like 'why is the footpath outside my house all crooked and wobbly so that old people fall over?'. Out of that you'd get a huge amount of literacy. They would go and interview people in the council and got invited to help the council lay a footpath to see how it was laid . . . they took photos. It got kids talking about their own environment. (Teacher)

However, this community-based approach was put on the backburner, supposedly because of resourcing problems but perhaps also because of parent/teacher concerns about the basic skills test (BST) results. In its place, a structured whole school approach to literacy was introduced, the main features of which included: allocated daily time for reading, writing, spelling and other literacy activities; regular and ongoing data collection and analysis of test material including the BST results and writing assessments; and an emphasis on small groups with AEW and SSO support in each class. A lot of weight was attached to 'quality one-to-one learning'. The school purchased additional SSO time to maximise adult/student contact and students often worked in ability groups (advanced, standard, special needs) based on tests results in spelling and reading. The emphasis given to small group instruction and cooperative forms of learning highlights the amount of emotional labour invested in developing strong personal and educative relationships between teachers, students and parents.

From bureaucratic to relational justice

Early in our conversations, teachers related the importance of relational justice and the need to move beyond the policy rhetoric.

> The school obviously dictates social justice by its very nature. But I believe that the principals who had been there before tried very bureaucratically to change things through ensuring there were rigid structures in place. Every teacher had a performance management book that had to be filled out. Every teacher had to have a copy of every policy and had to be able to recite it back

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

> almost word for word. The whole issue of social justice really impacts on the way people teach. It doesn't have to be explicit training and development. People put two things together. They see the role modelling of how we deal with kids . . . that's how administration and justice is seen to be done to kids. (Principal)

Time and time again we were reminded of the centrality of relationships and the importance of 'walking the talk' with students. Although a lot of emphasis was attached to behaviour management strategies, teachers spoke of the importance of good relationships as the key to learning. Although some children could be abusive and unruly, they looked to teachers for emotional and social support; in their fractured lives teachers could become trusted individuals. Hanging in with these students was clearly important for the survival of their schooling.

> The best story I had was on my first day here with a new class. One boy came in a bit late . . . I said he had to sit by himself. He sat there for about ten minutes and then said 'No, I've had enough'. He picked up his bag and walked out. I said to myself 'I've been here half an hour and I've lost one of my students.' But he came back . . . and he's still there . . . he's still happy and he says 'hello'. I must have done something right. (Teacher)

> For this group of kids it's very important that they have continuity of teachers. They see that as a stable environment for them. They say 'Are you coming back?'. (Teacher)

These comments are a salutary reminder that the knowledge, skills and dispositions required of teachers cannot be neatly summarised in competency frameworks, nor can educational outcomes be measured through accountability processes that focus solely on academic achievements. Such devices deny the richly nuanced nature of teaching, the centrality of personal relationships to learning, and the complexity of the contextual factors that frame pedagogical responses to poverty and cultural differences. This emerged quite clearly from classroom observations.

> Even when [the teacher] had to reprimand students for classroom misdemeanours, he retained a sense of trust and optimism. Kids were generally given a second chance and an opportunity to redeem themselves. He didn't just resort to institutional rules but was sensitive to kids' circumstances and able to negotiate quite complex pathways through potential conflicts. What I saw in this teacher's classroom affirmed Fielding's (2000) understanding of the importance of the personal in sustaining educative relationships and the possibility of transformative education. (Field notes)

Breaking down institutional barriers

Breaking down the institutional barriers between school and home and between teachers and students seemed to be especially important at Kangaroo Flat. Many indigenous parents did not have happy memories of their own schooling experiences, which had occurred in an era of assimilation when schools helped to reinforce deficit views of Aboriginal students and their culture. Speaking of his grandfather's experience of the racist policies of the 1960s, an AEW recounted:

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

> I still have my grandfather's permit when he was on the mission. He had to carry this permit with his photo on it and had to show the permit when he was off the mission. (AEW)

The school had to deal with the damaging legacy of institutionalised racism on a regular basis. Given their role in enforcing these policies, it was not surprising that the relationship between police and the Aboriginal community was not always based on mutual respect. We were told of an incident in which an appeal to institutional authority on the part of local police failed to hold any sway with a group of street-wise kids.

> We had the police here the other day because six kids had wandered off from school before the bell and gone shoplifting. The shop called the police and the police came up and were talking to these kids-seven and eight-year olds-in a very authoritarian way. 'You respect me because I'm a policeman', this young policeman said. He went on, 'I can lock you up. I can put you in gaol'. This kid looked at him and said 'Yeah!' [The policeman said] 'Do you think it's funny? I'll put you in gaol for two weeks'. It was getting worse. The kid's sort of going 'Wow; gee that sounds all right'. I thought 'You've dug a hole for yourself here'; and he eventually says, 'Well, [the principal] will let you off this time and I won't put you in gaol'. So I thought 'I'd better not say anything-poor bugger'. I said to the boy 'You're very lucky, Sam'. So that sort of 'respect me for whom I am, for what I am' carries very little water and that's because of the socialisation practices of the kid. Mum and dad don't have that level of respect for what you are, but they do for who you are if you establish that relationship.

Incidents of this kind illustrate the dangers of appeal to institutional authority. According to the principal, teachers who get into power games have lots of difficulties with children.

> If you are in a power situation over a child and the child's swearing and cursing, you're not going to win; they're going to be the ones with power in the end. You're going to have to back out of it. You're not going to win. Repairing relations is also an adult responsibility. If a kid gets angry and upset with you and walks out the door your next step is behaviour recovery. You're the adult in the situation. You're the one who has to go back and mend that relationship. (Principal)

Maintaining a sense of optimism

It's very difficult for a school like Kangaroo Flat to turn around the educational disadvantage of Aboriginal students. We were informed that students often experience success in primary years but drop out early in high school. In spite of discouraging statistics of Aboriginal participation and success in schooling, teachers must sustain a spirit of optimism and belief in the possibility of change (transformation). If this dissipates, teaching is very difficult and unrewarding.

> We always have to take the line that schools can make a difference. The minute teachers stop saying that . . . is when they should walk out the door. How much difference we make is a big issue. (Principal)

We were told that improvement needs to be measured by internal reference points, rather than relying exclusively on external criteria.

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

> In this school . . . every piece that [kids] move forward is a victory . . . the focus for us is to keep improving along a continuum. (Teacher)

To this point, I have focused on the school's attempts to address issues of educational disadvantage through literacy programs and other curriculum initiatives. To what extent did the new model of local school management support the school's agenda? I now examine the efficacy of new funding formulae and changes to school governance in addressing the educational needs and aspirations of the Kangaroo Flat School community.

'They've changed the goal posts'

When the council signed up to Partnerships 21 in 2001 many parents and staff had high expectations that the school would be financially advantaged and better placed to pursue its own priorities and programs. According to a school councillor, parents were persuaded that it was financially a smart move and one that would give them more say in running the school.

> I think Partnerships 21 is going to be good for us . . . I don't know a real lot about it. I've got some books that I should get stuck into more but talking with parents and the principal . . . it seems a good thing for us . . . [The superintendent] was basically saying it would be better for our school and it would give us more say. (Parent)

Most staff, it seems, were also convinced that the differential funding arrangements, as set out in Index of Educational Disadvantage, would deliver more funds and give the school greater freedom of choice in the selection of staff and the development of educational programs.

> I know that under P21 we still have the same placement process, but it still gives you a say in who you can offer contracts for more than a year. You can keep people who you know that should be here. (Teacher)

In the first instance, the additional revenue from the global budget enabled the school to appoint an additional teacher, thereby reducing class sizes, and to increase the amount of SSO hours to support the literacy focus described earlier in the paper.

> We bought, using P21 money, as many people resources as we possibly could to support that. As an allocation we get 70 SSO hours per week and on top of that we put another 85 hours. They are in classrooms every day of the week. Every teacher has an SSO in junior primary classes. (Principal)

However, early enthusiasm gave way to frustration and anger when the school's resource profile and global budget were dramatically downsized as a consequence of a downturn in enrolments-something which could be expected in a highly mobile population. A teacher explained the financial implications of this decision:

> I have this distrust of the department. They didn't only just change the goal posts; they pulled them out of the way. They took $132 000 off us. Originally they [told us] that we were not going to lose money on what we had before. If your school was worth a certain amount of money the year before, they would [maintain this base]. After we were in, they changed the rules. (Teacher)

Having committed funds to staff smaller classes as part of a literacy priority, the school had to draw on its own financial reserves to maintain the program.

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

> This has huge implications for the whole tone of the school because . . . we go and negotiate how we are going to spend our money. People are expecting [the money] . . . it's been negotiated and authorised by parents and the staff . . . and then we had to come to a staff meeting and hear 'Okay that money that was for literacy we no longer have'. That extra SSO time we were going to buy, we can no longer have. Why did they bother going through the process, if they were going to change the goal posts with one stroke of the pen? (Teacher)

Matters were compounded by a review of the school's assets that concluded that Kangaroo Flat had too much space according to international benchmarks. This had ultimately led to the wholesale removal of a classroom and a consequent reduction in learning spaces for students. At a governing council meeting a parent questioned the logic of this kind of rationalisation. 'How small a matchbox do you want to shove our kids in to?', she inquired of asset management personnel.

Other concerns arose from the new budgeting arrangements, not the least of these being the intensification of the principal's work and the additional loads of personnel involved in the administration of global budgets and financial reports. But a more significant issue concerned the accountability of the funding components of the global budget. As explained earlier, under Partnership 21 global budgeting arrangements, Aboriginal students attract extra funds. According to the principal, this had the potential to undermine curriculum as schools saw dollar signs flashing for Aboriginal enrolments. He argued that the school had a responsibility to ensure that it used additional money to support needs of students identified in the formulae and partnership plan. At Kangaroo Flat, funds were directed towards programs and structures to support learning for Aboriginal students, for example, in an extension of AEW hours and SSO support. However, the principal stated:

> My fear with Partnerships 21 is that not every school looks at it that way. They look at it as a bucket of money and say 'you beauty'. That's the real danger of looking at kids in terms of dollars. You see an Aboriginal kid in front of you and you see a dollar sign. It's very dangerous. The minute you start to look at it like that you've got to slap yourself and say 'Hang on. Stop doing this. Let's look at how we support the needs of these kids'. (Principal)

The crucial role of the principal for ensuring the equitable use of funds to enhance the learning of the most disadvantaged students is an issue I will return to later in this paper; suffice to say, it highlights a fundamental flaw in accountability processes in this model of local school management.

Parent participation

> With the Governing Council we have more say now on how decisions are made about our children in the school. . . You could [previously] but now we have got a bit more control. As just a parent if I had a concern, I would come to council and they would listen . . . but now we have more say . . . we've got more power. I feel like if I want to say something I can and I should be able to because my children are in the school. What makes us more inclined to come in is that it's more open under Partnerships 21. We are told we have got more say. (Parent)

At Kangaroo Flat, there was a concerted effort to improve the level of parent participation in school decision-making through the newly formed governing council and sub-committees. We were told that people could join a committee that interested them and they could pass on

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

any concerns to councillors through this group. A teacher suggested that there was an attempt to increase parent participation without necessarily involving them in the 'high-powered business of the council'. The school also provided child-minding facilities at meetings (courtesy of a staff volunteer) and had attempted to create a more informal setting for parent gatherings in the form of barbecues and social evenings.

But in spite of these opportunities, our discussions with indigenous parents revealed that they were under-represented on most of the school decision-making bodies. Although the ASSPA committee was functioning, we were informed that it relied heavily on the commitment of two or three parents to keep it going. The committee met once a month and the agenda usually revolved around the disbursement of ASSPA funds allocated to the school. In general, discussions about curriculum were confined to fund-raising for school camps and excursions for Aboriginal students. We were told that there was no official ASSPA representative on the governing council. Although there was Aboriginal representation on the council, only one Aboriginal parent attended on a regular basis.

Parents tended to deal directly with the principal, who had an extensive background in Aboriginal education and was a highly trusted person in this school, or with their child's teacher, rather than through the forum of a governing council. In addition, students and their families were able to access the services of committed and well-respected AEWs and an AET. Even though our Aboriginal parent informants said they did not have much knowledge of Partnerships 21, they expressed a high degree of confidence in the school's administration. Given that the student population was about 50 per cent Aboriginal students, there was a high degree of racial tolerance in the school community and the 'white' parents were also very supportive of the school's direction and the way that the school provided for the Aboriginal students.

In spite of the efforts of a small group of parents, there seemed to be little understanding of how Partnerships 21 worked. Certainly no-one we spoke to understood that schools were funded on student enrolments and that Aboriginal students attracted additional funding. Although parents did not challenge the fairness of existing arrangements, the question of what the school was doing with these funds did not arise. Parents seemed to be more preoccupied with the ways in which ASSPA funds could enhance their children's education through the allocation of funds for excursions, camps and information technologies. We did not see any evidence of system-led training and development to promote the development of *Yurrekaityarindi* as set out in recent Partnerships 21 documents. There was a recognition on the part of staff of the need to educate parents about the role of councils and schooling in general.

> If you want parents to help in schools and to make decisions, you have to develop their skills. This is exacerbated under P21 because a lot of parents who are called upon to make decisions aren't equipped to do so. This is where it falls very heavily upon the principal to build a team . . . this is politically a very big job. (Teacher)

As we observed in Kangaroo Flat, there is generally a low level of participation of Aboriginal parents in school decision-making, even in those forums (such as ASSPA Committees) that specifically represent their interests. Even if Aboriginal parents were well informed about the Partnerships 21 scheme, we cannot see how such a scheme could improve the involvement of Aboriginal parents in school decision-making because the scheme fails to adequately address the underlying issues that impede such participation. In the absence of representative structures, it appears that Aboriginal parents rely heavily on the commitment, knowledge and skills of AEWs and school principals to represent their concerns and to act as advocates for the education of Aboriginal children.

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

Having discussed the impact of local school management at Kangaroo Flat, I now want to step outside the boundaries of the school to consider some of the broader implications of recent policy developments for those working to ameliorate educational disadvantage in indigenous communities.

Peripheral voices and democratic practices

Teese (1998) reminds us that Australian schooling has been distorted by patterns of inequality that have been maintained by a network of private schools and universities. 'Private schools extend the power of the universities over the curriculum by enabling middle and upper-status parents to exercise power through the curriculum' (p. 403). Middle and upper-status parents have historically also exercised their power-in the form of economic, social and cultural capital-through the machinations of school councils. The unequal levels of parent involvement in schooling are especially evident in those communities that are already disadvantaged or disenfranchised. It is not that working-class families just do not have the economic, social and cultural capital, but that they also find school settings alienating. Working-class families, and we could include many Aboriginal families in this group, 'are more likely to have had negative experiences as students themselves and already experience feelings of insecurity and intimidation in school settings' (Mills & Gale, 2001, p.13).

Many Aboriginal families experience schools as 'while fella places' (Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000, p. 5), because of a history of cultural intolerance and racist harassment. The Partnerships 21 scheme has assumed that a positive home-school partnership will improve learning outcomes. No-one would disagree with this proposition, but the Partnerships 21 scheme has failed to acknowledge that many parents are 'on the periphery' (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002, p. 35) when it comes to having a voice in school life. The Partnerships 21 scheme assumes that having a voice is really just a matter of choice and ignores the complex matrix of power relations that define living in Australian society and that enable some and inhibit others from having their say in what counts as 'good' schooling. Like so many recent policy initiatives, Partnerships 21 has literally laminated over the class, race and gender tensions that distort Australian society and life in schools. The problems of educational inequality have been replaced with problems of efficiency and providing parents with choice. But such a policy regime fails to properly account for the way in which poverty and racism combine to render many Aboriginal parents quite literally voiceless in the life of Australian schools, and hence the possibility of making choices is severely limited.

Such analysis strikes a chord with Fielding's (2000) observations about the need to foster schools as 'person-centred communities' (p. 54), which have a 'reciprocal commitment to dialogue and mutual respect as the driving force of educative encounter' (p. 54). Fielding maintains that a current pre-occupation with issues of efficiency and performance encourages the development of schools as mechanistic or impersonal organisations which inhibit educative dialogues and the cultivation of personal relationships within the school community. Thus it is not sufficient to establish decision-making forums for parents, teachers and students; instead, what is required is the development of inclusive structures and processes that enhance 'dialogic relationships' (Freire, 1985) and promote democratic practices.

Of course, this is easier said than done. Goodman (1989) reminds us that dialogue is more than mere technique; rather, it invokes a commitment to an active form of democracy in schools (Hattam, McInerney, Smyth & Lawson, 1999). Similarly, democracy is not just 'an artefact or a set of cultural rituals (passively observing elections or voting)', but a process that is 'organised around values of giving its members a 'voice' in setting and implementing

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

its goals' (p. 92). According to Shor (1992), dialogue needs to be considered as a complex set of social practices, which involve:

> . . . a capacity and inclination of human beings to reflect together on the meaning of their experience and their knowledge and can be thought of as the threads of communication that bind people together and prepare them for reflective action. Dialogue links people together through discourse and links their moments of reflection to their moments of action. (p. 86)

However, for dialogue to occur, the question of equal power arrangements needs to be addressed-in particular, the extent to which some individuals or groups are effectively disempowered or marginalised as a consequence of their classed, gendered and racialised identities and the differentials of power operating within the institutional structures of schools. Of course, these are complex issues which cannot possibly be addressed within the confines of school communities. They require as much larger investment of resources, goodwill and support from the education system and society as a whole. From what we have observed, the Partnerships 21 scheme fails to adequately understand the extent to which Aboriginal parents are periphery voices in school decision-making processes. The impact of the new structure-*Yurrekaityarindi*-does hold some possibilities but will require much greater systemic support.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that the current approaches to local school management are based on 'counting' and 'accounting' mechanisms that place far too much responsibility on schools for addressing issues of educational disadvantage whilst letting the education system off the hook. What is at issue here is not the logic of devolution, nor the desirability of increasing local school autonomy. What is at issue, however, is how best to devolve decision-making to the school level that makes a difference for learning outcomes-especially for the most marginalised students. The principle of self-management appears to have broad acceptance in Australian education circles. Few principals want to turn back the clock and return to the highly structured and rigid bureaucracies of the past, but equally they view the notion of a stand-alone school as untenable.

Our research suggests that local school management has led to an intensification of principals' work and significant change in their roles from that of educational leaders to business managers. Moreover, schools are assuming much of the responsibility for the professional development of teachers, the management of equity programs and the development of curriculum resources. We have noted, in particular, the diminished role of the Aboriginal Unit in monitoring the use of funds to enhance the earning of indigenous students. There seems to be an assumption that schools will run with social justice action plans and initiatives without the leadership and policy direction from the education system.

However, education bureaucracies can (and must) play a crucial mediating role in sustaining social justice, equity and participation across the education system, where great disparities exist in the distribution of social, economic and cultural resources (Smyth, 2001). If this is left to schools-or to market forces-there is every likelihood that the most disadvantaged groups in our society will continue to be marginalised by education policies and practices. This cannot be done simply through funding formulae, accountability frameworks and performance management procedures; what is required is a much bigger commitment to fund equity programs, to sponsor and promote public debate about curriculum, and to intervene where necessary to ensure that social justice goals are being implemented in schools. If the ultimate goal of local school management is to increase participation and educational achievement for all students, the state must first achieve 'some minimal degree

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

of social equity so that decentralisation can lead to genuine participation' (McGinn & Street, 1986, p. 490). What is being canvassed here is the notion of a socially just bureaucracy that complements and supports a socially just version of the self-managing school (Smyth 1993).

References

Blackmore, J. (1994). Devolution and the 'new disadvantage'. In Deakin Centre for Education and Change (Ed.), Schooling What Future? Balancing the Education Agenda. Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University.

Bourke, C., & Burden, J. (1996). Factors Affecting Performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Students at Australian Universities: A Case Study. Canberra: AGPS.

Bourke, C., Rigby, K., & Burden, J. (2000). Better Practice in School Attendance: Improving the School Attendance of Indigenous Students. Canberra: AGPS.

Commonwealth of Australia. (1994). National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. Canberra: AGPS.

Connell, R. (1993). Schools and Social Justice. Leichardt; NSW: Pluto Press.

Connell, R. (1998). Schools, markets, justice: Education in a fractured world. In A. Reid (Ed.), Going Public: Education Policy and Public Education in Australia (Vol. 1. Australian Curriculum Studies Association, pp. 88-96). West Deakin.

Cox, I. (1998). Community Partnerships in Education: A Report on Local School Management Vol.1. Adelaide: Department of Education, Training and Employment.

Department of Education, Training and Employment.(1999). Partnerships 21 Take Up. Adelaide: DETE.

Department of Education, Training and Employment. (2000). Yurrekaityarindi. Adelaide: DETE.

Department of Education, Training and Employment. (2001a). New Index of Educational Disadvantage. Adelaide: DETE.

Department of Education, Training and Employment. (2001b). Achieving Outcomes for Aboriginal Students in P21 Schools Through Aboriginal Decision Making. Working Draft Document. Adelaide: DETE.

Fielding, M. (2000). The person-centred school. Forum, 42(2), 51-54.

Freire, P. (1985). The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation. New York: Bergin & Garvey.

Gillborn, D. (1997). Racism and reform: New ethnicities/old inequalities. British Educational Research Journal, 23(3), 345-360.

Goodman, J. (1989). Education for critical democracy. Journal of Education, 171(2), 88-116.

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

Hanafin, J., & Lynch, A. (2002). Peripheral voices: Parental involvement, social class, and educational disadvantage. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 23(1), 35-49.

Hattam, R., McInerney, P., Smyth, J., & Lawson, M. (1999). Enhancing School-Community Dialogue. Adelaide: Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching.

Jeynes, W. (2000). Assessing school choice: A balanced perspective. International Education Journal, 2(1), 1-9.

Kilvert, P. (2001). Partnerships 21. International Education Journal, 2(1), 1-9.

Kimber, P. (2000). Index of Disadvantage Consultation Summary. Adelaide: DETE.

Kimber, P. (2002). The Index of Educational Disadvantage. Primary Focus, 16(3), 29-30.

Luke, A. (1997). New narratives of human capital: Recent redirections in Australian educational policy. Australian Educational Researcher, 24(2), 1-22.

Mac an Ghaill, M. (1996). Class, culture, and difference in England: Deconstructing the institutional norm. Qualitative Studies in Education, 9(1), 297-309.

Marginson, S. (1997). Public education and the market. South Australian Educational Leader, 8(2), 1-8.

MCEETYA. (1995). National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: 1996-2002. Canberra: DEETYA.

McGinn, N., & Street, S. (1986). Educational decentralization: Weak state or strong state? Comparative Education Review, 30(4), 471-490.

McGregor, C. (1997). Class in Australia. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books.

McInerney, P. (2000). Sustaining public schooling as an ethical endeavour: A critical ethnographic account of school reform for social justice at Wattle Flat. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Adelaide: Flinders University.

McInerney, P., Hattam, R., & Smyth, J. (2002). A Report on Aboriginal Perspectives of Partnerships 21 . Adelaide: Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching.

Mills, C., & Gale, T. (2001). The 'ideal': What does this mean for schools and their communities? Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Fremantle.

Morrow, A., Blackburn, J., & Gill, J. (1998). Public education: From public domain to private enterprise? In A. Reid (Ed.), Going Public: Education Policy and Public Education in Australia. Deakin West: Australian Curriculum Studies Association.

National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. (1994). Discussion Paper. Canberra: AGPS.

Rizvi, F. (1994). Devolution in education: Three contrasting perspectives. In R. Martin, J. McCollow, L. McFarlane, G. Murdo, J. Graham, & R. Hull (Eds.),Devolution, Decentralisation

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Brisbane, 2002
Australian Association for Research in Education

and Recentralisation: The Structure of Australian Schooling. South Melbourne: Australian Education Union.

Seddon, T. (1995). Educational Leadership and Teachers' Work. Adelaide: Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching.

Shor, I. (1992). Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Smyth, J. (Ed.). (1993). A Socially Critical View of the Self-managing School. London: Falmer Press.

Smyth, J. (2001). Critical Politics of Teachers' Work. New York: Peter Lang.

Smyth, J. (2001). The self-managing school and social justice: Are they on the same planet? The School Field, 12(3/4), 71-90.

Smyth, J., Hattam, R., Cannon, J., Edwards, J., Wilson, N., & Wurst, S. (2000). Listen to Me I'm Leaving: Early School Leaving in South Australian Secondary Schools. Adelaide: Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching.

Soucek, V. (1999). Educating in global times: Choice, charter and the market. Discourse, 20(2), 219-234.

Taylor, S., Rizvi, F., Lingard, B., & Henry, M. (1997). Educational Policy and the Politics of Change. London: Routledge.

Teese, R. (1998). Curriculum hierarchy, private schooling and the segmentation of Australian secondary schooling 1947-1985. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 19(3), 401-417.

Thomson, P. (2001). The sound of one hand grasping at straws? Struggles for quality and equity in public school education. In P. Nursey-Bray & C. Lee-Bacchi (Eds.), Left Directions: Is There a Third Way? (pp. 178-192). Perth: University of Western Australia Press.

Whitty, G. (1997). Marketization, the state and the re-formation of the teaching profession. In A. Halsey, H. Lauder, P. Brown, & A. Wells (Eds.),Education, Culture, Economy and Society (pp. 299-310). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Whitty, G., Power, S., & Halpin, D. (1998). Devolution and Choice in Education. Melbourne: ACER.