

Student dilemmas - responses to systemic policy change at the grassroots

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Refereed Paper to be presented at the Joint NZARE-AARE Conference
Auckland, New Zealand, December 2003

Introduction

We hardly know anything about what students think about educational change, because no one ever asks them (Fullan, 1991, p. 182). When adults do think of students, they think of them as the potential beneficiaries of change. They think of achievement results, skills, attitudes, and jobs. They rarely think of students as participants in a process of change and organizational life. Innovations and their inherent conflicts often become ends in themselves and students get thoroughly lost in the shuffle (Fullan, 2001, p.151).

This paper reports part of a larger study of students in educational change. Educational change is a complex phenomenon which is continuous in schools (Levin & Riffel, 1997). The term may be used to refer to any of the processes that alter the behaviours, attitudes, roles and responsibilities of those who are involved in education, or alter the structures, procedures or outputs of an educational organization – such as a class, school, school district or an entire educational system (Fullan, 1998; Hargreaves, Leithwood, Gerin-Lajoie, Thiessen, & Cousins, 1993). Hopkins, Ainscow and West (1994, p. 21) identified two main forms of educational change as *incremental change*, or the “gradual, often subtle transition from one state to another”, or *planned change* which “seeks to interrupt the natural development of events, to break with previous practice to establish a new order”. Further, they note that educational change may originate from *external* factors, ‘what others would do to us, to our school’, or *internal* factors which they describe in terms of ‘natural’ or ‘organic’ growth. In this study, the emphasis is on *planned* educational change, originating from the *external* pressures of system level policy initiatives.

Much educational change is about redefining roles involving shifts in power and responsibilities, between the different actors involved (Friedman, 1997), and there are many actors involved in educational change, including school administrators, teachers, parents, the community and students. Yet, arguably, it is those in the policy elite who exert the most influence, using their power, privilege and status in order to sustain and propagate particular versions of schooling (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998), leaving students submerged in what Freire has termed a ‘culture of silence’ (Freire, 1970). Fullan (2001) has argued that students are usually excluded from both the processes and decision making associated with change and that instead of being empowered by the changes, students become the ‘objects’ of change and find themselves lost in the changing environment. However, the power of the often silent majority can be used to subvert change (Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992) and some studies indicate that students may be the most powerful, especially when it comes to protecting the *status quo* (Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Friedman, 1997; Thiessen & Hargreaves, 1993).

Nieto (1994) has pointed to the deficit of research that includes the student as participant. This paper aims to make a contribution to foregrounding the roles and responses of students in educational change. Specifically, it focuses on educational change associated with ‘restructuring’ policy involving school closures, amalgamations and the creation of middle schools and senior colleges. The paper reports a single case study conducted in 2001 and 2002 from a larger project on student perceptions of educational change in the State of Western Australia (WA) in schools under the authority of the Department of Education [1].

Background context

Educational change in Australia in recent decades reflects many of the trends evident in other developed countries, especially the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA), New Zealand (NZ) and Canada. One of the meta discourses used to justify continuous waves of educational restructuring over the last few decades in such countries has been empowerment to local school communities through devolution of decision-making from central authorities to individual school sites (Karlsen, 2000). Critics, however, have argued that it may be more a case of shifting responsibility for education from the state to localized producers and consumers in an increasingly marketised climate (Apple, 2001; Whitty, 2002). For example, the UK – which historically has provided many models for educational change in Australia – witnessed top-down devolution initiatives from the 1980s through the Local Management of Schools (LMS) policy. This restructuring, it was argued, would increase

local level accountability, whilst the state sought greater centralized control over schools through the introduction of the National Curriculum and OFSTED (Office of Standards in Education) inspections. In conjunction with open enrollment, reframed in the discourse of parent choice, parents were encouraged to choose schools for their children on the basis of school performance (Phillips, 2001), ensuring that 'failing' schools would close (Ball, 1994). Whitty et al (Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998, p. 45) have asserted that devolution through LMS can be seen as the "complete abdication of responsibility by the state" and a mechanism for "shifting the blame" for educational 'failure' from central authorities to schools.

The mantra accompanying policies of devolution and marketisation in many countries, became 'school effectiveness' with a focus on efficiency, strong leadership, high expectations for students, clear goals, and frequent quantifiable monitoring (Fullan, 1991; Townsend, 1994), including standards which can be set and measured. The result has been that blame for inadequacies in the school system have been passed on to schools, teachers, poor educational leaders and poor choices by families (Rae & Weiner, 1998). Thus, policies of devolution to local schools and market competition between schools has become increasingly 'politically convenient' for governments (Morley & Rassool, 1999) which have then used performance measures as a basis for the allocation of education funding (Rae & Weiner, 1998), thereby exacerbating educational inequalities, and further disempowering the educationally disadvantaged. These policy trends have been common across different countries, giving rise to much interest and research on the globalisation of education policies and practices (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998; Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997). However, we would argue that there is a need to avoid glossing over context-specific differences with 'globalisation talk', and one step in this direction is to conduct research which considers, in detail, 'the local' within 'the global'. This emphasis leads into the focus of the current paper on educational change associated with restructuring, specifically based on the perceptions of students, in one particular case study school in one State of Australia.

In the State of Western Australia, in the 1980s, a significant starting point in the push towards school-based management occurred with the Better Schools Report (Ministry of Education, 1987). However, after initial moves towards devolution, there was a hiatus, and very little real change took place (Angus, 1998). In the late 1990's, the Western Australian Government released its *Plan for Government School Education* to set the direction for the government education system into the twenty-first century (Education Department of Western Australia, 1997). This Plan represented a policy ensemble aimed at restructuring education framed in the rhetoric of improving outcomes for all students. The Plan included the *Local Area Education Planning Framework* (hereafter referred to as the *LAEP Framework*) with an emphasis on reorganizing the delivery of education by changing the focus of planning from the system level, or an individual school level, to a group of schools within an education district, purportedly to better manage the delivery of curriculum and resources (Education Department of Western Australia, 1997). The *LAEP Framework* was couched in the discourse of social justice and the provision of a quality education for *all* students (Education Department of Western Australia, 1997). Yet at the same time resources were to be used efficiently and effectively, and the aim of any specific strategies chosen by any particular area must be to "maximise the use of facilities and any spare facilities should be sold and funds used to provide area and State improvements" (Education Department of Western Australia, 1997). Staff, parents, secondary students and the wider community were to be consulted on plans for their area – the *LAEP Framework* was to be a "customer driven process" (Education Department of Western Australia, 1997, 5). Restructuring options to be considered in the consultation process in each district included school amalgamations, school closures, and the creation of senior colleges and middle schools.

The case study presented here is that of the *LAEP Framework* policy enactment within one group of schools in one district to create a single school from the amalgamation and closure of three others. The primary focus is on the students involved in this educational change.

Research methodology

Critical theory provided the overarching conceptual framework for the study. Specifically, the study was based on exploring the exclusion of students as participants in the change process. A central

concern was to examine how these students experienced their role in educational change as expressed in their 'voices'. To fully understand students' roles in educational change, it is important to understand their subordinate social status and to explore students' own assumptions regarding this role (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). There is a culture of domination, an inherited social hierarchy that is observed in schools, where students form the lowest rung. The impact of the status of students on their experiences of change was explored in this study (Crotty, 1998). By giving voices to the students it allowed, and perhaps encouraged, them to think critically beyond the "horizons of current experience" (LeCompte, 1995, p. 99) and to reflect on their responses and roles in the change process.

The research questions which guided the study were:

- What are students' perceptions of educational change as it is happening to them in the case study school?
- Do students believe that the changes have made any difference to their school experiences and outcomes?
- To what extent do students believe they have influenced the process of educational change in the school?
- In whose interests do students perceive changes to the school were made?

The exploratory and in-depth understandings sought in the research meant a qualitative case study method was most appropriate. The case study method was chosen because of its flexibility and because it allows information to be collected from many sources (Punch, 1998; Yin, 1993). Focus group interviews with students were the predominant form of data collection and these groups were conducted over two years (2001 and 2002). Other data collection methods for this study included semi-structured individual interviews with a number of the staff involved in the *LAEP Framework* implementation, and the analysis of documents on the *LAEP Framework* and its implementation from both the system level and the individual case study school.

The larger study from which this paper is drawn uses multiple case studies of schools which had created middle schools and senior colleges as a result of the school amalgamations and closures characteristic of the *LAEP* process. A mixture of purposive and self-selection sampling was used to choose the student respondents in each case study school. In the particular case study reported in this paper the Year 10 group was invited to participate in the study because these students had been asked to accept more of the educational and structural changes that took place than other student cohorts in the new school. Students were invited to be a part of the research process by letter, and those students who responded were then placed into focus groups. Five focus groups, which ranged in size from four to eight students were conducted in 2001, the first year of operation of the new school. One group was all female, one group all male, and the other three groups were mixed. One individual interview was conducted because the student did not want to be interviewed as part of a group, an option given at the outset. Follow-up interviews were conducted the next year, however, these will not be reported in this paper.

Focus groups were conducted in a music room, attached to the arts centre of the school, away from the main office area. The room was light and airy, with a view over the oval. The students sat around a table as a group with the interviewer. It was hoped that this would encourage students to become 'conversational partners' (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 11). Interviews were taped using multiple microphones of different colours. Discussion of the taping equipment, especially the coloured microphones, often helped to break the ice and relax the students.

The research setting: 'Lighthouse School'

The findings of student perceptions of educational change in one case study school, 'Lighthouse School' (a pseudonym), are presented in the next section below. However, as individual case study schools are nestled within their own unique localized settings, they should not be studied in isolation from appropriate contextualisation, and therefore the setting of Lighthouse School is briefly outlined here.

Lighthouse school was created as a new school through the amalgamation and closure of two large secondary schools, and the downgrading of a third to a junior high school. The school district covers a number of wealthy suburbs, where many families have double professional incomes. Education Department and District Office staff initiated the implementation of the mandated *LAEP Framework*. A committee to ‘manage’ the implementation process was established and included representatives from District Office, staff from all high schools in the district, the Parents and Citizens Associations in the district, the WA State School Teachers’ Union and several students. A member of the Education Department central office conducted the meetings, where it was announced that the status quo would *not* remain – restructuring was a *fait accompli*.

In line with the *LAEP Framework*, the district had to come up with alternative suggestions for the provision of education for students in the district, which would include school closures and amalgamations and the possibility of middle schools. As the process went on, the debate over what shape the restructuring would take became increasingly heated. All schools in the area had strong community ties and many ran special programs to bring in students from outside of their catchment area, in line with earlier devolution policy initiatives and moves towards marketization, accentuating competition between schools. Thus, these school communities were expected to collaborate on an emotive issue such as school closure within a wider augmenting climate of localized inter-school competition. Unsurprisingly, the consultative process was not a smooth one.

Towards the end of 1997 it became apparent that despite local area planning the Education Department had already taken the decision to close both of the larger schools, downgrade the third school and build a new school on land previously purchased by the Education Department in an area where property values were much less expensive than for any of the three schools involved in the closures. This strategy would offer efficiencies based on both savings through ‘economies of scale’ and the sale of the valuable real estate on which the old schools were located. Much was made in the local and State media that the new school would be built at a cost of \$23 million – considered to be a significant sum for a government school. The new school began to be referred to as a ‘Super School’, referring to both its larger size and its image, which would showcase ‘educational excellence’ in the government sector, in competition with the high concentration of private schools in the area. Staff for the new school were appointed on a formal merit-based selection process from across the State. In many ways Lighthouse School was to be the ‘elite’ of the government sector.

Lighthouse School, which would “strive to be a centre for excellence in all learning areas ... of education at the beginning of the new millennium” (Coghlan, 2001), opened in 2001 with a middle school for years 8 and 9 on the same campus but separate from a senior school for years 10 to 12. The total student population was about 1200 and staff numbered approximately 120. The study took place in this context during the first two years of operation of the new school when students’ perceptions of the changes they were experiencing were sought.

It is pertinent to note briefly at this point that staff at Lighthouse School who were involved in the local area planning committee strongly believed that the decision about closures, amalgamation and separate middle school and senior campus was made by the Department of Education before the consultation process even began. They reported that the planning committee was genuinely concerned to optimize the outcomes for *all* students and that, for example, they believed better subject selections would result from the ‘restructuring’. That is, they were operating within a social justice paradigm; however, in the end they realized that the decision was an economic one, made by others. These staff variously viewed the local area planning process as a ‘sham’ and ‘mere tokenism’ (staff interviews, 2001). However, in this paper, rather than reporting staff reactions in detail, the intention in the report of case study findings below is to turn up the focus on the perceptions of students. Extensive quotes are used in the presentation of the data to give students direct and ‘unadulterated’ voice.

The case study findings at Lighthouse School

Responses from the focus group interviews revealed that students were very involved with the changes in their school; their responses were thoughtful and insightful. There were many interesting comments made by the students on all aspects of the changes, however, due to the nature of the paper,

only those issues most frequently discussed by students will be highlighted here. Students had on occasion discussed issues with parents, older siblings and friends. The findings, for the purposes of this paper, are organised in relation to the research questions. Themes were drawn from the focus group interviews conducted in 2001 when Lighthouse School opened.

- *What are students' perceptions of educational change as it is happening to them in the case study school?*

A number of the students in the Year 10 cohort at the new Lighthouse School first became aware that changes were on the way in late 1998, whilst they were in Year 7, almost three years before the closure of their old school. Others did not find out until the following year when they were in Year 8. Those who found out in year 7, were told because they were enrolled as part of the Academic Talent Program (ATP) at one school, which was to be closed and moved to the other school involved in the amalgamation in preparation for transfer to the new campus. Those who found out in year 8 found out through a newsletter that went home, some from parents, or from other siblings. One student said he "found out through a friend" and one student did not find out until the end of the year before his school closed. Other than those involved in the ATP program, none of the other students can remember being told officially, or directly by staff at the schools they were then attending, that their school was to be closed.

Most students were very quick to perceive that Lighthouse School was to be a new school, in culture as well as in name and place, although some students felt that the changes were in name only. One of the students who believed it to be the same, made the comment that "Apart from the facilities, people are the same, the teachers are almost the same. I just feel it's just the same apart from the facilities and that's about all". However this student was in the minority, most reflected the views of this student: "Yeah well it is a whole new school". As one student put it "Brand new school. It's like the day you went to a school. Like say you moved schools, but a few people you knew went with you, or you knew a few people there. That's exactly what it's like. The [old school] experience is not there anymore" and another student indicated: "It's a new school. It's a whole new feel. Yeah, everything's different except for a few teachers that came [from the old school]. You can tell".

In the 2001 focus groups, students expressed particularly negative opinions about the process of change. Many believed it had all happened too quickly. "They didn't have to rush with this one," said one student and another student commented, "we could have easily stayed there for another year." Another student suggested that a slow implementation would have been preferable, starting the new school with Year Eights only, working through all the problems and then slowly adding more years, "I reckon they should have done it like, slowly add like years in, so add the Year Eights. They can get used to it and stuff. Then when they go on to Year Nine add more Year Eights and so they just like flood in". Students also disliked the ongoing nature of the changes, as reflected in the view "the thing is that at the moment we've all got a negative attitude because it's just starting out and of course there's going to be bum, bad things at the start, like hiccups, but we've got to learn from our mistakes". However, many students were very accepting that this was how it was going to be with comments such as "Of course they have to change things, because they have to trial the thing out" and "the rules are just changed and changed and changed and that is so understandable because it's a brand new school".

One issue that students commented on frequently was the size of the new school and how they responded to this change, moving from a smaller school to a larger school, or 'super' school as it has come to be known. Comments included: "It's different schools amalgamated together. So it is a huge school"; "Here there's so many people"; and "We always knew that there was going to be more people. We always knew that." Some students felt that this was a negative aspect of the changes, that it affected the friendliness of the staff and their own ability to make friends. These comments were made most often in comparison with the schools that had been closed, such as "We had our community. We had a lot of friends and stuff. Yeah. That's how it was viewed. It was a pretty small, like a small community, that's basically what it was like. It was so tiny. Everyone knew everyone like" and "like [Lighthouse School] is such a big school and I think that's what I don't like about it. I don't like it, because at [the old school] everyone knew each other. But here it's sort of like you walk past and you don't even know them".

Each of the focus groups was very aware of the temporary nature of the disruption. They anticipated an end to the changes at some point in the future, whether one year or ten years down the track. As one student succinctly put it, "I think that this will be a better school within the next five to ten years. They would have ironed out all the things, there would be a lot more trees and vegetation to give it more of a homely look and also I think people wouldn't care about it any more. It wouldn't be new any more; it would be just another school. There'd be another super-school I reckon, somewhere" (referring to the fact that this was the first such school in WA). However, the ongoing disruption came at a cost to students, as reflected in the following comment "in a way because there's going to be mistakes and they've got to find those out...but at our cost, at our cost".

- *Do students believe that the changes have made any difference to their school experiences and outcomes?*

Students were very aware of the effect the changes had made on their learning, with the majority believing that the changes had been detrimental to their learning. Several students noted a dramatic drop in grades: "Like okay I got straight 'A's last year and now this year I'm like 'C', straight 'C's. And that's a big change"; "I think I'm heading for a 'D' now. I went from an 'A' to a 'D'"; and "I'm in the top maths class and it's divided. We have people who, okay got good grades last year but then this year they're just struggling". Some students blamed the over crowded classrooms, "we have like thirty-five students in our class and it's just too much." Others students commented that they had had as many as four teachers for one subject since the beginning of the year, reflecting the high turnover rate of staff at the new school. Other students just gave into the stress created by changes, as indicated by comments: "You just give up" and "a lot of the students aren't like happy here basically and a lot of people don't want to be here. It's just too disruptive like, you've been shifted here so quickly, everything's changed, and we haven't had time to settle in. New rules and stuff like that and people just don't want to be there." However, students who came over from the downgraded school generally believed that both the quality of teaching and teachers was better at the new school, as exemplified in the comment "I think it's just the way they teach. Like, they teach different things over there and over here's more, like it's more professional, you're restricted, can't muck around or anything." A few students from both schools which closed also felt that their learning had improved as a result of the change, "my maths has improved since last year" and "Yeah Mr. R's a good teacher". Others were much more ambivalent about the effects the changes had on their learning, with comment such as "Some classes yes and some classes no" and "it hasn't changed like the way I'm going to go to school and do my stuff."

Students were also very perceptive about the differences the new school was making in their schooling experiences. Students noticed changes in teachers' attitudes, teaching style in line with the new school rules and general changes in the expectations placed on them. A dramatic change in the attitude of the teachers was noted as reflected in comments such as "They're not, they don't care, it's like they don't care a lot" and "I don't think they try to know students. Like in [the old school] there wasn't as many people, but they were still quite a lot but all the teachers knew all the students and they were all on like a personal basis, whereas here I think they have just thought 'oh there's too many', I won't even bother to try and be nice to them all. Or find out something about them" and "They're only here to teach you". Most students believed that teachers' lack of friendliness was a direct result of the new environment, as expressed by one: "I think the teachers were a lot more friendly and open in [the old school]. Whereas here they've sort of got a, it's like they've been given these strict rules that they have to abide by and so they can't let you do as much stuff as you would in [the old school]." Most students also believed that the expectations on them to perform had increased although they were not always given the support they sought, as in this case: "My maths teacher he says don't say you can't do it, it's that you won't do it. Sometimes we can't do it; we don't understand it and he won't explain it to us".

In general, students believed they were being encouraged to study more and aim for university with comments such as, "We're being encouraged to go for six [tertiary entrance] subjects". Although students also perceived that it was those who were enrolled in the ATP who were given the most encouragement and the better teachers, as several students explained: "because I'm in ATP [they] give us better teachers. They know more and so; more has been concentrated on me. So I've got bigger

workloads and I'm used to that"; "Once you realise that, there was the ATP and then the rest, the rest of the people, but what the ATP did in their class time was much different to what everyone else did"; and "How are the people who aren't in ATP going to improve if they don't have the facilities that the ATP has?". Most students believed that those who were not making the grade or who were misbehaving, were being encouraged to leave or go to Technical and Further Education (TAFE), as is reflected in such comments as, "They've been talking about apprenticeships and TAFE"; and "telling you what you can do if you want to leave school now. Shouldn't they be encouraging you to finish Year Twelve?" Yet, as one student responded, "It's because they've noticed that a lot of the students aren't like happy here basically and a lot of people don't want to be here." However, the first student believed that the school's focus should be helping the students settle into their new surroundings, as this student commented, "they need to concentrate on making us happy while we're here, so we will go through to Year Twelve."

Most students were very cognizant of the lack of 'character' of the new school, especially in comparison with their previous schooling experiences. Comments included: "My school in [another city] was a shithole. But it was a nice shithole, you know. It was, there was just something about it that, that you'd miss it, you know. I don't know, but here everything is so sterile I think. It's almost like a hospital"; "It doesn't have personality"; "Yeah, like all the families went through it [the old school] and everything but [Lighthouse School] is new and no one's done it before"; and "Yeah, here it's so young." Students believed this made a difference to their school experiences, leading them to a form of passive resistance when the year began. "Well that's what I mean. People at the start of the year we kind of rebelled a bit. You know like, it's just like, oh yeah, I come to this school. But now I have like the realities here and yeah we have to actually be here" and, as another student found "But there's nothing to make you want to improve". Here too the students showed their awareness that this feeling of newness and lack of 'character' would be temporary with comments such as "It's going to get scrappier"; "The more the students vandalise it, the more it'll feel like home"; "If the schools are a bit older you'd say 'oh this happened at one point' and it was really funny because this happened and the school did this and we had people throwing eggs here and stuff.' It will have like a history."

- *To what extent do students believe they have influenced the process of educational change in the school?*

The students did not believe that they had any significant influence over the process of change in their school. Students all spoke about the one or two people who they were aware of had been involved in the changes, these were "Year Twelve basically" and a student councilor, who, as one student put it, "they're just letting him attend meetings I think. I'm not really sure what he did there". The choices students remembered being a part of were the dress code, the name of the school (of a pre-selected group of four) and the school emblem, which they found unimportant, as indicated in the comment, "stuff like the colours of the logo, something small like that. Insignificant." Some students spoke of becoming disinterested, offering passive resistance to the changes, because of their lack of input. As one student commented, "They said 'oh we all gave them a fair chance to put in their word', but they never even asked, really asked if we the students wanted to do anything. They asked the community and the parents, but not the students. And so like most of the students didn't want to know." Most students believed that being left out of the process was as, one student said, "unfair". Another student added, "it was sort of our school. I felt that it was going to be and we should get to have a say in it, rather than just the teachers and the head of the school." Other students made similar comments, "We're the ones going to be using the facilities. Getting the best out of it so I just felt that we should be able to put like what we thought in so we have just a better environment. But they never, they never asked." One of the students from the school, which was downgraded, explained that as far as he was aware no student from his school had been involved in any way. This student remarked that, "Oh the principal came down and told us all about the new school. We didn't really get to choose what we wanted. He just told us what we're getting."

Generally the students did not believe that they had any influence in the ongoing situation at Lighthouse School, as is reflected in this comment from a student, "No, it's already set. You can't really change the stuff that is already set. You can change little stuff like the socials and stuff. You can organise those, but you can't really [change anything]". It was not that students were unaware that

there were avenues for attempting change. Students listed the Parents and Citizens Association, generally complaining, and the student councilors, although many of them were not sure who they were. However, these were not recognized by most of the students as a viable means for affecting real change. Comments about the student council, such as “all they do is like organise events for us. They don't have any input to any changes to be made in school” and “they don't really do anything” reveal what students in the focus groups believed their role to be. The Year 10s, these students believed, were seen as being least able to affect change in a student hierarchy, whilst the Year 12s were more powerful, as shown in comments such as, “You know how you've got, like I mean a student hierarchy” and “It depends what year group you're in. Like if you're in Year Ten not really. Year Twelve yeah”. Also those who were seen as being liked by the teachers' were able to affect change and “get what everyone's said [asked for].”

Students had successfully made one change that these students could think of, “Well we sort of got lockers with us complaining about them”. However, this turned into a disappointment for the students as they had to pay for the rental of them, and only three hundred were purchased, so the Year 10s missed out. Students had unsuccessfully tried the previous year to register an official protest about a teacher, who according to one student was “the best teacher”, but who was not being employed at Lighthouse School, after the change had taken place. As one student explained, “The students came out with the petition and they got like every student in the school to sign”. The focus group of all boys suggested that they might take matters into their own hands, especially when it came to making changes concerning some of the art, which had been purchased and was displayed in prominent places around the school. Their suggestion was that “you could dig it up and sell it”.

The majority of students in the focus groups believed their role in the school was “just to learn, that's it”. Another student believed it was “to come and be one of like thousands. Just to be nothing”. Another student described their role as “basically you come to school, do work, go home, do work, and come to school. Pretty repetitive.” Some students also perceived that their role as student was tied to the image of Lighthouse School, as is reflected in the comment, “I think we're just like sort of filling a space. These schools are supposed to be for the students so we can have like good jobs when you're older and like be successful and stuff. But, it's like, I don't know, it's sort of like a picture. It's all image and stuff like that and it's all the people that have nothing to do with the school...”

- *In whose interests do students perceive changes to the school were made?*

Image was a dominant theme students responded with when asked in whose interest the changes to the school were made. This is reflected in comments such as, “It's like it was built with PR in mind not with the students in mind” and “I think they built it more to impress people”; “It's like a big army theatre or a tourism place.” As one student commented, “It's the limestone. It sort of gives you an ancient sort of feel you know”. Students said they formed these beliefs because there were constantly visitors in the school, watching everything the students did, interrupting classes, being led through the school by the principal, as these comments by the students show, “Every day we have knocking on one class”; “Everything is on show. Everything here is for show”; “It's supposed to be a super school”; “the new super school”; and “Everything new. Like an adventure playground”. In fact, students believed this to be the new role of the principal, to be the administrator of the school and to lead visitors around, as these comments illustrate, “She's like administration so you can't really expect that much of her” and “The only time when I see her is like when she does assemblies, and when she's giving tours to like official people or something”.

However, most of the students found the marketing to be ‘over the top’, as is reflected in the following, “I don't know. It just feels like the advertisement to like the public and stuff like that. It's all, it's overstated basically”. In fact in the opinion of the some of these students the school was, as one student said, “nothing special”; and another, “Yeah it's nothing special. It's like it's a school, you know”. These students felt very much the dupe in the image building, believing it achieved very little for them. They made comments such as, “we're just sort of the dummy”; “we're just little pawns”; and “we're just like the guinea pigs”.

Most of the students were very aware of the covert motives for building Lighthouse School. The competition with the private sector was one reason identified by the students. As some students said,

“I think the people who built the school and designed what was going to happen tried to make it a private school” and “they wanted everyone to be pretty much the same. I think they had this model that they wanted. They wanted someone who was really academic, it's pretty obvious they pretty much want the same things as [a private school] has”. These students were aware that large amounts of money were being spend to give Lighthouse School the image of the private sector. One student commented the following, “They're spending hoards of money on it. It's a totally new design. We've got this prime land and everything. So it is just like [a private school] to go here”. And, on reflection, students believed the changes had been successful in drawing people from the private sector. Many of the students commented that they had friends from the private sector joining them in their classes, as is indicated in this remark “I know a lot of people that pulled out of the private school to come here”. And as one student, himself from a private school, said, “The school's not that much different to private schools. A lot of people from my old school come here, it is too expensive at a private school. There's not that much difference, so it's sort of throwing away your money for a little bit of difference”.

The students in the focus groups had a very heightened perception of the role money played in the building of Lighthouse School. They knew a lot of money had been spent on the school, some believed it was wasted, as is reflected in the following remark, “I think they spent too much money on trying to make it look good instead of making the school work well”. Other students commented that Lighthouse School “looks cheap. My dad was looking through it and he was going 'it looks a really cheap school'. And I'm going 'yeah” and “[like] costume jewelry”.

All the students in the study were aware that their old schools were run down and that it would cost a lot of money to replace and repair. However, students also realised the dual purpose, both of saving money by not making the repairs, and in making money by selling the land of the old schools. This is indicated in the following remark, “It was getting to the stage where it [the old school] did probably need repairs and I think instead of doing it up, they just built a new school and the land is worth a lot, so [the Department of Education] is going to make a profit out of that”. Even students who had, in the words of one of them, “never really been asked that question before”, believed that the schools were closed in order to sell the land, the perception being that the land the schools were on were worth more if it was sold for housing. Overall, these students were very cynical about the closure of their old schools and the building of Lighthouse School. As one student remarked, “Oh we got like a note from like the, from the premier or something saying how good it will be and we'll have a really good school because everything will be new and everything. But I'm, yeah you're just after the money, and commercialising I would say, just money, money”.

It is important to conclude the presentation of findings from Lighthouse School by emphasising that this data from students was collected in the first year of the new Lighthouse School. Student perceptions of educational change are likely to evolve over time – hence the value of longitudinal case studies.

Concluding discussion

The following discussion focuses on meta level themes to emerge from the case study. It is important to note that there is no attempt to generalise the findings from the single case study of Lighthouse School to other schools responding to the *LAEP Framework* or other schools undergoing restructuring in other systems. As Rosenmund (2000) indicates, case studies are closely connected with their specific contexts, and therefore the findings should not be directly transferred to other contexts. However, we take the position as argued by Uhrmacher (1993) that case studies can constitute heuristic devices or ‘good tools for thinking with’ and they can provide the reader with some insights into potential student responses to educational change elsewhere. There will, however, be important differences in other settings, which we would not want to gloss over. In fact, we would highlight the importance of understanding the different contexts in which students find themselves and the different ways they may, or may not, then participate in educational change. Lighthouse School is located within an upper middle class area, and, as part of the larger project from which this paper is drawn, case studies have been conducted in other districts, including schools in low socio-economic areas and

in rural areas. This triangulation has provided for interesting cross-case analysis to highlight both similarities and differences in different contexts which will be reported in subsequent papers.

The *LAEP Framework* incorporates both the rhetoric of social justice and the discourses of economic rationalism in its aim to restructure educational provision in the State of Western Australia. Both discourses are evident in the policy documents, which explore restructuring in the interests of economic efficiencies concurrently with issues of adolescent alienation and students at educational risk. This study revealed that both discourses were also evident at the school level, as students and staff struggled with the conflicting messages of the policy as it was put into practice at Lighthouse School.

Economising discourses

The *LAEP Framework* represents one particular example of ‘economizing’ education (Ozga, 2000) as manifest in different forms in other Australian States and other countries. Devolution of decision making to local areas was to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of educational delivery. Although the policy featured rhetoric of localized implementation decisions, the processes were clearly top-down, with limited empowerment to the local level in relation to the policy goals. The whole process was orchestrated and monitored closely by the state in an example, *par excellence* of ‘steering at a distance’.

In the case of *LAEP*, parents would not only choose the school for their children to attend, but also, in theory, they would choose the structure of the school through processes of local planning and consultation. However in this case study, arguably, there was evidence of ‘engineered consent’ (Apple & Beane, 1999) for a decision made beforehand by a policy elite well removed from the local context. The ‘contrived consultation’ was quite transparent to the disempowered school community at Lighthouse School. The three schools targeted for amalgamations and closure became responsible only for the speedy and efficient implementation of the centrally established goals so that any ‘crisis’ in the implementation was ‘exported’ from the central authorities to the local school (after the notion that devolution policies ‘export the crisis’ by Whitty et al, 1998).

Apple has argued that marketisation policies have shifted the emphasis from student needs to student performance and from “what the school does for the student to what the student does for the school” (Apple, 2001, p. 71). Similarly, Ball has claimed that when education is reconstructed as a consumption good in the market system “children and their ‘performances’ are traded and exchanged as commodities” (Ball, 1994, p. 51). Lighthouse School was intended a ‘super school’; in essence, a lighthouse educational institution (Hargreaves et al., 1993) reaching “new and dizzy heights of excellence” (McWilliam, Hatcher, & Meadmore, 1999, p. 9) in competition with the wealthy established private schools’ market in the area.

In the new education market, impressions are important as they are what sells a school (McWilliam et al., 1999). Evidence from students in this case study suggests that Lighthouse School has been successful in portraying a ‘private school’ image and a view that it is economically wasteful to attend a private school when there is an ‘excellent’ public sector alternative. For example, the buildings, the artwork, even the types of students that they understood to be acceptable in the school, all appeared to conform to a private school image. The buildings were made with limestone, giving Lighthouse School at the same time a new and an ancient appearance. Image was foregrounded.

Markets have predictable affects on all schools, and Lighthouse School is no exception. Of relevance to this study, Apple and Beane (1999) note the role of markets in redefining the principal’s role as an agent ‘selling’ the school to an external audience, as observed by many students in this case study. Also, as this case study has shown, a market climate has also led to a redefinition of the role of students who no longer attend simply to ‘get an education’; their role now includes projecting an academic image, for show. They are to add to the image of the school by performing well, to enhance the school’s performance in published league tables and hence further the reputation of the school. Those perceived as not fitting the school’s new image may be encouraged to leave, and hence traditional forms of education are reinforced with the introduction of markets (Whitty et al., 1998).

Policy making is complex and messy and there are often contradictions and conflicts (Ball, 1994). As is evident in the policy framework of Vidovich (2002) the interlinkages between the micro, meso and macro levels of the policy process are two-way. Whilst *LAEP* was in essence a top down policy initiative, students did not always passively accept what was happening to them. Although they were powerless to have any real influence in the changes, they offered various forms of resistance during the process. Fullan (1991; p. 4) makes the point that “resisting certain changes may be more progressive than adopting them”. In one instance, students were more active in their resistance, organizing a petition in the hope of retaining one teacher who they identified as ‘the best’ from their old school but who did not gain a position in the competitive merit selection process for staff at the new school. Students have very clear ideas about those teachers who best influence their learning (Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996). This may have been a good time for senior personnel making the staffing decisions to listen to the voice of the students.

Competing social justice discourses

Concern with social justice issues such as students at educational risk forms a major part of the *LAEP Framework* policy discourse. However, there are significant ideological tensions between the social justice discourses and the often competing economic discourses underlying the *LAEP* policy. Henry and Taylor (1997) have noted that amongst policy makers there is a belief that the discourses of economic rationalism and social justice are complementary. The policy assumption has been that the introduction of economic rationalist policies, leading to economic efficiency, would also lead to more equitable outcomes for all students (Taylor, et al., 1997).

It is often touted by policy elites that introducing the ‘twins’ of devolution and marketisation policies will bring greater diversity in education. However, as Apple (2001) has pointed out, rather than leading to increased quality of education and greater diversity, these policies have not created a great many differences in the types and styles of education being offered, with most schools opting for a traditional model of education. Arguably, markets exacerbate vertical differentiation and hierarchy rather than promote horizontal diversity. At the case study school students believed that staff were more interested in those who showed academic ability and that those who did not fit this model were encouraged to take an alternative pathway of technical training in another institution. It was the students in the academic extension course and those willing to sign up for a large number of tertiary entrance subjects, who the students perceived were given all the resources, the best teachers, and the greatest encouragement. Rather than diversity, alternatives became devalued, and the emphasis placed on the ‘academically talented’ students, reinforcing traditional constructions of upper secondary schooling. Whilst the encouragement to move to technical education does not conflict with an economic discourse for educational outcomes, it did sometimes conflict with the students’ own desires as many had expectations of going to university. Students wanted to learn but some believed that the restructuring as a result of the *LAEP* policy process had made a detrimental impact on their education and future life prospects.

The *LAEP Framework* and its implementation was framed in the interest of increasing the quality of student learning for all. Yet, as Newmann and his fellow researchers (Newmann & Associates, 1996) found in their study of school restructuring, educational institutions, whilst paying a great deal of attention to changes in school organization, often failed to make a difference to the quality of student learning (Newmann & Whelage, 1995).

Empowerment of students in educational change

McNeil (2000) asserts that market ideologies in education have the effect of dehumanizing students, “delegitimising of students as young human beings” (p. 90), which is not in the interests of any students. As students become reconstructed as both customers and a commodity to be traded between schools, arguably they are disempowered as active democratic participants (Apple & Beane, 1999). The approaches to educational change at Lighthouse School reflect a form of “paternalistic authoritarianism ... framed by an expectation that children should defer to their parents and teachers” (Elliott, 2000, p. 183). However, the students in this study had strong views about the ‘restructuring’

occurring around them. Miles (1998) in a moment of whimsy wrote his vision for the year 2020, including an "increasing use of students as researchers on classroom practice [to play] a very strong part in both the reconceptualization of teaching and the diffusion of practice" (p. 63).

If educational change is to be successful in the promotion of learning for all students, then students must be allowed, and encouraged, to take an active part in the process, instead of being relegated to a powerless position as 'objects' of change (Fullan, 1992). It may be time to recognize that students also have an active 'role' in schools (Corbett & Wilson, 1995), rather than allowing them to remain as a silent majority, who are given no voice, mute, excluded from participating in the transformation of their own education (Crotty, 1998). The only valid way to move from silence to participation and liberation, according to Freire is to engage in dialogue (Freire, 1970). Dialogue cannot be forced, but should be as the result of committed involvement, otherwise it degenerates into pseudo dialogue, a farce and little more than "paternalistic manipulation" (Crotty, 1998, p. 155). Freire believed that all education should be "programs of vital dialogue from start to finish" (Crotty, 1998, p. 155), learners and educators working together as partners.

The *LAEP Framework* for educational restructuring in WA schools reflects 'global' policy trends of devolution and marketisation, although there are important context-specific differences in the ways that such policies play out in particular localised settings. Despite policy discourses of empowerment to local educational sites, students were rarely heard in the ensuing processes of educational change. However, this research has demonstrated that, in their own ways, students were deeply impacted by the change process. Recognition of an active role for students in educational change may provide a means through which 'economising' and 'globalising' discourses can be counterbalanced with discourses of social justice and empowerment for those at the local level – students, parents and teachers alike – in the interests of *all* participants in the processes of change.

Notes

1. Education is the legal responsibility of State governments in Australia. In the State of Western Australia (WA) government schools are under the authority of the Department of Education (DOE) which was known as the Education Department of Western Australia (EDWA) in the 1990s and the Ministry of Education in the 1980s.

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