

## An opportunity for participatory democracy?\*

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### ABSTRACT

Participatory democracy is a process by which individuals learn to make, live with and revise decisions about the running of the institutions that govern their everyday lives. One possible interpretation of the Picot Report is that it provides an opportunity for schools to be administered as participatory democracies. Its provisions give power to parents and students to make decisions with teachers about the curriculum, resources, and staffing of their schools. It will be argued in this paper that while the framework provided by Picot is consistent with the development of schools as participatory democracies, these aims are unlikely to be achieved unless the implementation processes incorporate a theory of change that includes the educative processes involved in learning how to participate. Without such a theory many of the problems of non-responsiveness, alienation and vested interests will remain.

Participatory democracy is a process by which individuals learn to make, live with and revise decisions about the running of the institutions that govern their everyday lives. Some political theorists argue that such processes are essential to the development and maintenance of democratic societies because they provide sustained opportunities for its members to learn how to construct a society in which all can feel a sense of belonging rather than alienation.<sup>1</sup> These processes bear little resemblance to the more familiar processes of representative democracy in which citizen's responsibilities for the governance of their institutions is restricted to the occasional election of representatives.

One possible interpretation of the Picot Report is that it provides an opportunity for schools to be administered as participatory democracies. Its provisions give power to parents and students to make decisions with teachers about the curriculum, resources, and staffing of their schools.

That power is in turn balanced by an accountability to the community and the state for the type of decisions made (i.e., whether charters are consistent with National Guidelines) and for the consequences of those decisions (through the Review and Audit Agency).

It will be argued in this paper that while the framework provided by Picot is consistent with the development of schools as participatory democracies, these aims are unlikely to be achieved unless the implementation processes incorporate a theory of change that includes the educative processes involved in learning how to participate. Without such a theory many of the problems of non-responsiveness, alienation and vested interests will remain.



## Participatory Democracy and Information

In the following section of the paper, some of the processes implied by the notion of participatory democracy are sketched out. If parents are going to share the governance of an institution they need access to relevant information so that they can educate themselves about the reality as well as the rhetoric of its functioning. They also need access to a range of ways of interpreting school life, so that they are not dependent for their understanding on the professionals' definitions of problems and solutions. A Board of Governors can not challenge a principal's individualistic approach to school discipline problems for example, unless they have access to alternative ecological or cultural interpretations of such behaviour.

One implication of the call for parental access to information is that many schools may have to re-examine the balance they currently draw between the protection of teachers from unwanted intrusions, and parental rights to information and interaction with those responsible for their children's education.

Many critics of Picot have been sceptical about whether parents, particularly in working class communities, will be able to find the time, money or energy to play more than a token role in the governance of their school. This issue goes well beyond that of finding five parents to be representatives on the Board. To define the problem so narrowly is to abandon the possibility Picot presents for participatory rather than representative democracy. The problem can not be adequately understood unless we return to the question that the Picot committee asked but did not answer in any detail. What is it about schools that parents currently judge as non-responsive, and what provisions could redress this concern? It may be that parents judge schools to be non-responsive because they do not listen to and resolve grievances that they hold about the education of their own child. They may also associate non-responsiveness with the school's approach to particular educational issues such as the treatment of a minority or of a controversial curriculum topic. If these are the bases for parental judgments of non-responsiveness they do not imply that parents want to be involved in all aspects of the life of the school. The school can address such concerns by focusing its efforts on the way parents are informed and consulted about the progress of their own child, and about the controversial issues for which the community as a whole needs to take some responsibility. An early step in any implementation of the Picot proposals should be to discover the areas in which parents want to be involved and the areas which they are prepared to leave to the professionals. Without such an analysis the consultative demands of a school-community partnership will become unworkable for both partners.

So far, the discussion of the need for information in the participatory process has been a rather one-sided account of how the community can become better informed about and influence the school. The problem of trust is also felt by the professionals, who fear that the community may make demands upon them that are insensitive to the constraints they work under, or that violate their conceptions of what counts as an appropriate curriculum. Responsiveness to the community is not a matter of finding out what parents want and then discussing the pragmatic issues of its implementation. The views of parents should be subject to the same processes of critical examination as those of professionals. Statements of wants, interests and values should be seen as a first rather than a last step in the process of consulting the community. A recent study of school and community attitudes to the Draft Syllabus on Maori Language in Primary Schools illustrates some of the concerns felt by educationalists about vesting more power in local communities. The survey results showed a much lower level of support for this syllabus than for others that had been reviewed recently.<sup>2</sup> Support was most likely among marae members, and Maori resource teachers, and least likely from members of school committees and Parent Teacher Associations.

It is these sorts of findings which promote calls for strong national guidelines which constrain local choices and which protect minority group interests. Even with such guidelines, there will be many occasions on which the merits of community opinions will be open to question. The educative potential of processes of participatory democracy lies in the ability of actors to debate the worth of

each others' beliefs and to learn about the conditions under which those beliefs would change. Many teachers and committee members based their responses to the Draft Syllabus on Maori Language on their evaluation of their own and their school's ability to deliver a quality Maori language curriculum. Given training and adequate resources, many might express different opinions in the future.

## Participatory Democracy and Processes of Dialogue

The claim above that participatory democracy requires participants to debate the worth of each other's views requires some explanation. On the one hand the point could appear to be a trivial one, since the Board of Trustees is designed to represent differing points of view which will obviously be debated in meetings if not in the school at large. On the other hand, there are many common sense and academic theories which take it for granted that differing interests are irreconcilable and that talk of altering or transcending such differences through a process of mutual education is idealistic at best and naive at worst. It seems that the credibility of participatory democracy lies not in the sort of structural arrangements that are outlined by Picot, since these are relatively easy to design and implement, but in the development and implementation of models of democratic processes which work under conditions of potential conflict.

When members of a school community all agree about the purposes and processes of education it is relatively easy to generate a positive school climate which is sustained by the community and the staff. If, however, members of that community diverge in their opinions and interests it is much more difficult to achieve the same degree of cohesiveness and positive educational climate. In such cases, groups that find themselves in the minority either opt out of the decision-making process or the differences between the groups fuel sustained and escalating conflict as has happened recently in at least two Auckland schools.<sup>3</sup> Either option means an increase in the alienation and disaffection of members of the school's community. Participatory democracy in such conditions requires participants to have much more than access to relevant information about the various issues. Where there is conflict between a group of parents and teachers, for example, parents could use such information as 'ammunition' with which to 'take on the professionals.' Similarly, exposure of teachers to the local community could strengthen their unexamined beliefs about how the community is or is not supportive of the efforts of the school. Neither structures nor information can guarantee the types of skills and values which are necessary for the democratic resolution of such conflicts.

Participatory democracy requires participants to be open rather than closed minded; to take a fallibilist rather than a dogmatist stance towards their own and others' views. Unfortunately, social psychological research suggests that where a lot is at stake (on controversial issues) people attempt to impose their meanings, beliefs and preferences on others and continue to do so even when they genuinely attempt to do otherwise.<sup>4</sup> It is extremely difficult for people to conduct dialogue on matters that are of importance to them in ways which facilitate the testing and critical examination of their views. People are much more likely to adopt persuasive forms of dialogue instead, which obscure rather than make transparent the reasoning, values and evidence which lead them to hold their views.

Persuasive forms of dialogue are characterised by statements like the following:

'This is a uniform school. Always has been and always will be.'

'Students these days, just won't accept anything that's not directly job-related.'

'Well, the reality is...'



'They are just pushing us around...'

'This is a mono-cultural community so a bicultural curriculum is just not appropriate.'

'The teachers up there just don't care about the slower students'

Each statement communicates a judgment of the speaker which is potentially contestable, but it is conveyed as if it is self-evident and incontrovertible. The reasoning and evidence that led the speaker to the judgment are not communicated, so it is hard for other speakers to judge its reasonableness. By disconnecting the judgment from the grounds on which it was based, listeners may not recognise it as a judgment or, if they do, they may find it difficult to challenge the speaker, and ask that the grounds for the judgment be examined. In short, the speaker's views are communicated in ways which impede rather than facilitate their testing.

Given that those who hold differing views are also likely to exhibit the same communication mode, the consequences in terms of escalating misunderstanding, mistrust and divisiveness are readily predicted. Individuals who find themselves on the losing end of such processes may eventually protect themselves by reducing their commitment to the organisation, a phenomenon known as distancing.<sup>5</sup> Individuals who find themselves at the winning end of such processes may over time only be able to talk with and serve the like-minded.

Participatory democracy requires that persuasive forms of dialogue be replaced by what Habermas has called 'communication 'oriented to understanding'.<sup>6</sup> While numerous educational researchers have discussed the importance of such processes, few have tackled the difficult intra- and inter-personal issues involved in its implementation. An exception is the work of Chris Argyris who has written extensively about the values and skills implied by such processes and about the training that is required for their adoption.<sup>5,7</sup>

Given the prevalence of persuasive forms of dialogue and the lack of confidence expressed by many principals in their ability to negotiate effectively with a range of community groups, the implementation phase should make provision for training of principals and other key players such as chairpersons of the proposed boards, in participative and consultative processes. Given the huge investment in time and resources that such training would imply, it should be targeted at those schools which request such assistance and at those schools which have difficulty in productively resolving existing differences between various interest groups.

## **The Role of the State**

There has been considerable debate since the release of the report about whether the proposals represent a reduced commitment by the state to an equitable provision of education to all New Zealanders. Questions remain about what counts as equitable and about the extent to which the state is prepared to constrain local choices in the interest of national educational and social goals such as biculturalism, and the retention of a common curriculum for all students.

The structure provided by Picot makes ample provision for the state to exercise such constraints. The charter of every school must meet criteria set out in national guidelines, and the performance of the school will be measured accordingly. The report itself however says nothing about the nature of these guidelines and it is this silence which leads some commentators to question the strength of the state's commitment. The omission is particularly puzzling given that a national curriculum review, released the year before, made detailed recommendations about the guidelines which were needed to maintain equitable and comparable educational provisions across the country.<sup>8</sup> When asked why these recommendations had not been picked up by the Picot committee, one member (who herself had been a member of the earlier taskforce to review the curriculum) replied that the committee had seen its job as providing a framework within which people could exercise choice and that this precluded them from imposing particular guidelines.<sup>9</sup>

Quite apart from the fact that recommendation of particular guidelines does not constitute their imposition, the committee has failed to assist the government with the difficult question of the grounds upon which state interference in local decisions could be justified. It is these grounds which should be specified in any national guidelines and they should surely reflect a conception of the quality of education conducive to our social goals. By avoiding these questions the committee has portrayed educational administration as a contentless value free exercise in the design of organisational structures.

The question about the role of the state cannot be finally answered until some subsequent committee describes the national guidelines. If they were similar to those in the Curriculum Review, they would send clear and controversial messages about the type of educational principles which need to be respected by all communities. For example, if one of those guidelines was that a school's curriculum should be bicultural, all monocultural curricula, including those from monocultural communities, should be rejected by the proposed Ministry of Education.

It could be objected that such guidelines are incompatible with the emphasis placed in this paper on the opportunity that the Picot proposals provide for participatory democracy. Such an objection can be answered by arguing that the state represents interests which are not directly involved in local decisions, but which could be either directly or indirectly affected by them. Decisions made at the local level contribute to the type of society in which all New Zealanders live, and those decisions should not contravene wider interests such as public funding, equity of provision and a curriculum which provides an accurate reflection of the social and physical world.<sup>10</sup> Democracy requires of course that our conceptions of those wider interests be open to question and debate.

### **Management Practices and Participatory Democracy**

The report recommends the incorporation of several management practices such as management by objectives, which could be implemented in ways which are quite inconsistent with democratic administrative practices. Once again the Report lacks the required detail which would enable its readers to discriminate between democratic and autocratic uses of these management practices. If organisations are held accountable for the attainment of objectives in a way that denies the possibility that there may be valid reasons for that failure, then such procedures could be seen to be autocratic.

On the other hand, organisations that do not have objectives and ways of monitoring them can be said literally to not know what they are doing. Data on objectives provide constraints on participants' beliefs about what they have done, and criteria against which to judge which of those beliefs are more or less plausible. To not know in a publicly verifiable way what one is doing is to not only not be accountable, but to be unable to take part in intelligent critique of one's own practice.

How can the emphasis on objectives in the Picot report move towards this learning-oriented use, and away from its unilaterally controlling potential? One possible answer is that the Review and Audit Authority be required to investigate not only the extent to which objectives have been met, but the reasons for any such short-fall, and to debate such reasons with the Board of Trustees during the period between the interim and final reports. The eventual decision to sack the Board should rest not on a sustained failure to meet objectives but on a failure to reach objectives for reasons that warrant dismissal.

Such an explicit focus on reasons would help to change the debate in the community and in the Ministry from one about which schools did or did not meet their objectives to one about the reasons why some schools fared better or worse than others. In this way the accountability process would include an educative as well as a monitoring function.



The Picot Report recommends a clear separation between those who evaluate learning institutions and those who provide advice. While this separation may overcome a potential conflict of interest between those two roles it could also have some negative consequences. McCulloch's paper in this volume discusses the failure of many educational policy documents to influence the practice of school administrators and teachers. One reason for this failure may be that those who deal at the level of policy do not concern themselves sufficiently with the problems of implementation. To leave such problems to others is to assume that any difficulties that arise are practical ones that do not in any fundamental sense challenge the coherence or intent of the policy. The implementation process should be treated as a test of the policy itself and not simply as a test of the administrative skill of officials.

The Picot model lacks feedback loops by which policy-makers and evaluators (the Ministry and Review and Audit Agency) can learn about and take some responsibility for the implications of their own advice. Until such feedback loops are established educational policy is likely to remain unable to achieve the changes in educational and administrative practice that it intends.

The above argument suggests that the Review and Audit agency should be charged with investigating the reasons for a school's performance as well as the level of that performance. These expanded reports should be made available to the Ministry so that relevant officials may consider their implications for the provision of assistance to schools and for the policy critique that they may provide. Similarly, the reports should be made available to any taskforces established to provide the Minister with policy advice, so that their deliberations can be tempered by some empirical evidence about the consequences of previous and proposed educational policy. Such feedback loops would reassure the educational community that the state was taking some responsibility for helping schools to achieve their objectives as well as responsibility for monitoring their performance.

### **Challenges for Researchers**

Much of the debate about the implications of the Picot Report has been informed by arguments from analogy based in historical or comparative evidence which has apparent relevance to the proposals. Predictably, the defenders of the report have spent much of their time denying the applicability of the various analogies and hence the validity of the associated arguments.

The nature of the debate has revealed the paucity of policy-related research on New Zealand education, and perhaps more significantly how we are willing in education to make far reaching proposals on the basis of scant relevant evidence.

This final section sketches some of the key questions which could guide research about the implications of the report's recommendations. Given that debate over Picot frequently turns on quite specific theoretical disagreements, the research should attempt to test those disagreements rather than address atheoretical descriptive questions. One disagreement for example turns on the type of curriculum choices that would be made by parents in differing communities. Given the current economic climate, would parents make narrow vocational choices as Lankshear (see this volume) suggests? We need research designed to test this hypothesis rather than to explore parental curriculum choices in a more open-ended atheoretical way. Such research would need to specify which parental choices would count as 'narrowly vocational', and which choices would count as not being narrowly vocational, so that the hypothesis was open to disconfirmation. A second research question concerns the alleged non-responsiveness of schools to the wishes of parents. Unless research is done on the nature of these concerns it is quite likely that the solutions proposed by Picot will not resolve them. What are the dilemmas that principals and teachers face in attempting to be more responsive? Will the structural changes recommended by Picot increase the quality of dialogue between the school and its parents or will they, through the greater representation of parents and appeal procedures, force schools to appear to listen?

Given that the Picot recommendations translate many of the governance procedures of secondary schools into the primary schools, it is puzzling that this move was not preceded by a programme of research on the effectiveness of these provisions. To what extent can parental representatives on the Boards of Governors of secondary schools be said to represent the community? What procedures do they use to consult with the community at large, and how do they gain access to information about the school? How much time do parental representatives spend on school business, and what resources do they have available to them? Some case studies of Board decision-making on controversial issues such as school uniform might indicate how concerned Boards were to find solutions that respected differing view points that all could live with.

## Conclusion

The opportunity that the Picot Report provides for a learning institution to be administered as a participatory democracy could be lost if the structural changes recommended are not informed by a theory of participatory processes and democratic management. Nothing in the proposals is inconsistent with the governance of schools as participatory democracies, but the conditions needed to help ensure this objective are inadequately addressed. The report underestimates the complexity of such change and the degree of individual and organisational learning required. Phillip Capper summarises his views on the areas in which we need to learn, in his recent PPTA article:<sup>11</sup>

‘We need to learn. We do not yet know how to use central policy as a guide to school-based decisions rather than as a prescription. We do not know how to involve the whole community in decision-making so that what eventuates is acceptable, and not merely defensible. We do not know how to resolve conflicts between school and community; or between sections of the community; or between teachers.’ (p. 25)

One response to the long term challenge posed by this reading of Picot is to label it as idealistic, and to opt instead for structural changes that balance power and resources. While such changes may be needed in the short term, if the underlying problem is people’s impatience, intolerance and unwillingness to design institutions in which all can fruitfully participate, then changing the power balance will merely mean that a different group will feel unheard and disaffected. This paper has indicated a few of the policy, training and research implications of accepting the longer term challenge.

## Note

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