

Picot and community control

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ABSTRACT

The Picot Report is the most recent, and perhaps one of the most publicised, reports on education that have attempted to grapple with the issue of the control of education in New Zealand. Clearly the Picot report favours decentralisation of educational decision making and far greater community participation. Unfortunately the Picot committee does not address the possible arguments against greater community involvement. What Picot proposes is a system that gives people limited control while making them more accepting of other inequalities that are becoming more apparent. What is required then is that school principals examine the Picot proposals for the hidden agenda. Given the Picot argument, albeit one-sided, in favour of increased community decision making and day-to-day involvement in schools, teachers and administrators must face the likelihood of substantial changes to the way primary schools are run should the proposals be implemented. The implications for school principals, in particular, are far reaching.

Education Boards 'Should be Abolished'. It is stated that the question of the abolition of Education Boards has engaged the attention of the Minister of Education, who is convinced that in the interests of the system it is desirable that the Boards should be done away with, and that the Department should take over the entire functions of administration and inspection.

This timely reprint in the New Zealand Herald of May 24 1888 illustrates that the concern for a more appropriate and effective form of educational administration is not new. It also illustrates that the centralised versus decentralised control of education dilemma has exercised the minds of educationalists for at least a century.

The Picot Report is the most recent, and perhaps one of the most publicised, reports on education that have attempted to grapple with the issue of the control of education in New Zealand. That this report has received such widespread recognition is both the result of a national publicity campaign and of an international trend toward change in educational administration. A comparison of Australian and American educational administration concluded that one of the most important lessons to be learnt from the comparison grows out of the fact that these two countries are not only changing but in some ways moving in opposite directions:¹

Australia's centralized system fostered equality of school funding (more than in America), and professional, efficient, stable, co-ordinated operations that generally met uniform standards. But it also promoted a closed, insulated, in-bred, bureaucracy and it stifled choice and responsiveness - thus leading to some of the current pressure for decentralization. America's decentralized system fostered greater diversity, parental involvement and open-ness. But it also promoted inequality, parochialism, fragmentation and segregation thus leading to some of the pressure for greater centralization.

One suggestion that arises from the pattern described is that no education system is stable over time as long as competing values and community expectations are involved. Another suggestion is that what governments do is largely determined by the existing problems of where governments are rather than by an analysis of potential problems of proposed alternatives. This can be illustrated by Mr Lange's enthusiasm for aspects of the Picot Report and a desire to overlook potential difficulties. For example, his belief that if 'real decision making' is given to communities then people will have the expertise and willingness to come forward and be involved. However, there is no current research of New Zealand school communities to back this apparent statement of faith. Furthermore, as Murphy illustrates, every solution to a problem apparently has unintended negative consequences that later demand solution long after the original problem is forgotten.

The concern is therefore that the Picot report be carefully analysed and widely debated before implementation. Furthermore this critical analysis must be research-based and presented in the light of clear assumptions regarding the value of education for individuals and the role of the state in ensuring a degree of equity from whatever system is decided upon. Equity in this sense meaning a nationally determined 'bottom line' below which educational opportunity is not allowed to fall, or, to put it another way, an 'acceptable' degree of inequality is maintained.

Clearly the Picot report favours decentralisation of educational decision making and far greater community participation in appointment of professional staff, in allocation of funds and in determining the curriculum content within yet to be determined national guidelines. This emphasis on community participation also extends beyond the local educational institution to include Community Education Forums and a Parent Advocacy Council to allow wider community input and in the latter case to 'represent and promote the interests of parents within the education system'.²

This clear direction appears to be based on a number of basic assumptions that go largely unexamined within the report. There seem to be at least four worthy of closer perusal.

Firstly, there is an assumption that people given freedom of choice will make the best decisions in both their interests and in the interests of society. Certainly the report places great emphasis on freedom of choice and the necessity for all people to be able to exercise their options. This approach is not surprising given other recent decisions in the economic field such as the removal of superannuation and medical insurance incentives and the proposed move towards a flat taxation scale. While freedom of choice is a laudable objective it seems to assume, however, that everyone has an equal number of choices and the ability to exercise choice.

The report does address the issue of individual ability and rests its case on the assumption that
.... most people are competent to carry out the tasks given to them and that nearly everyone will have a genuine commitment to doing the best job for all learners.³

Furthermore,

The concept of competence also extends to parents. We feel that parents want to be involved more fully in various facets of the education of their children and the overall direction of our proposals is to encourage this.⁴

It is certainly not the intention to imply parents are incompetent. The involvement of parents in the education of their children is widespread and highly valued in New Zealand. However, the question remains as to whether all parents are able or wish to be more involved than they currently are. Certainly research into these questions could have given more base data.

A second assumption implicit in the Picot document is that parents have a 'right' to make educational decisions for their children apparently on the presumption that children are the 'property' of their parents. While this assumption is understandable it does raise questions concerning child advocacy, whether children have rights of their own and to what degree the state should be involved in deciding the type of education children should receive. The report does propose that in the case of secondary schools one member of the Board of Trustees be elected by

the student body to represent student interests although the question remains as to why all parent elected representatives must themselves be parents of students.

A third assumption worthy of examination concerns the belief that increased parent involvement will improve educational opportunities for individual children and that this in turn will improve schools, which in turn will be good for education in general. It is the experience of the writer that most parents are vitally interested in their individual child's progress but are much less concerned with education as it affects all children. It is unlikely that this individual interest will be suddenly translated into a collective concern. Nor does the report discuss how parents can be helped to be representative of the total parent body of the school other than by assuming an increased level of competence.

David, in a review of the Green Paper 'Parental Influence at School' expressed similar concerns over this same issue in the English system. He states:⁵

... it would be a mistake to argue against a parental place in education entirely. It is important for children's happiness and well-being that schools work in partnership rather than conflict with parents. But that place has to be carefully and critically specified. Otherwise parental influence will merely be added on to parental involvement and disadvantaged children will be no better off than in schools as presently organised and run.

Clearly, schools should be made accountable to those who have all children's needs and interests at heart.

The Picot report also makes the assumption that competition from the market place can be used to increase school effectiveness by presuming that competition among schools will improve schools. In the current system it is claimed that successful performance may even be punished.⁶ The case quoted described how a principal, 'through good teaching and management practices', increased the school roll and consequently endangered his/her position in that school. The report fails to recognise that students change schools for a wide variety of reasons, not all of them based on sound educational decision making. Again it is the experience of the writer that parental choice of school is often based on structural considerations: for example, open plan versus single cell buildings, ethnic make up of a school population or the perceived skill of an individual teacher rather than overall school teaching and management practices. Further it could be argued that outstanding teachers and principals are assets of value to education in general rather than individuals with allegiance to one particular school.

The report goes on to state that disincentives to good management are also seen in the costs of different resources used in education. The example outlines how

... the costs of heat, light and water are 30 per cent higher per pupil in primary schools than in secondary schools, and that maintenance costs are some 82 per cent higher per square metre in primary schools.⁷

Unfortunately no reasons are examined as to why this might be. For example, primary schools open longer, security arrangements are more sophisticated in secondary schools and so on but the assumption is left lying that the schools are at fault because the personnel are inefficient.

The concern is that if schools begin to compete for pupils the overall quality of education will suffer. If schools become preoccupied with efficiency the effectiveness of teaching and learning will be reduced. Already an outmoded competitive examination system has illustrated that competition in education can lead to the kind of failure observed by the Picot Committee.

Given the concern regarding the assumptions outlined above what are the advantages to be gained from increased community involvement in schooling? The report suggests at least five.

1. Greater parent and community participation will enhance the education of children. The report is adamant on this point:

We are convinced that our proposals will encourage commitment, initiative, energy and enthusiasm and that these will inevitably lead to improved performance.⁸

2. Schools will be more open and responsive to the needs and interests of their learners thus increasing choice for parents and students. This is important because

...we see the creation of more choice in the system as a way of ensuring greater efficiency and equity.⁹

Furthermore it is claimed that desirable social consequences will follow because

We are proposing a system that emphasises local autonomy and participation - this can only make the learning institution even more of a focal point for the community than it is now.¹⁰

3. Greater parent involvement will enrich and broaden the school curriculum. It is generally accepted by educators that parents and other community members possess knowledge and expertise that can be used to advantage in classroom programmes. However, the report interestingly ignores this point and emphasises the perceived dangers of the current 'pressure-group-consensus approach to centralized decision making'.¹¹ It is claimed that the current system is particularly vulnerable to pressure group politics and that by increasing local decision making feelings of powerlessness will be reduced and the curriculum will be more appropriate to the needs of students.
4. Schools will be more accountable to the communities they serve. The present system is criticised for being too complex and this will be simplified by making each school's Board of Trustees accountable to the school community. Not only will the educational achievements of the institution be judged by the community on a 'regular' basis but the institution's performance will, it is suggested, be formally monitored by a Review and Audit Authority every two years.
5. Political support for schools will be increased. The report is concerned that there is

... widespread unease about students' standards of performance¹¹

and that

... the present level of public discussion fuelled as it is by generally negative comments - seems at best uninformed and at worst destructive for consumer and professional alike.¹²

The desire is that by increasing community involvement more people will be better informed about the nature and purposes of schooling and thus be in a better position to make informed judgements. It also seems, of course, that communities which are deemed to have responsibility for the running of their local school are much less likely to lobby politicians successfully regarding improvements to, or injustices within, the system. If they do they may be returned to their local community to sort the problem out. Certainly from a politician's viewpoint this particular aspect of community involvement is tantalising indeed.

Unfortunately the Picot committee does not address the possible arguments against greater community involvement. There are individuals and groups who would argue that the present level of community participation is adequate. A 1984 Committee of Inquiry into education in Western Australia addressed the role of the school community and outlined arguments both for and against increased involvement. The major points against increased involvement are interesting in light of the Picot document and may be summarised as follows.¹³

1. Standards in schools will deteriorate. The reason given is that decisions about the nature and purpose of the curriculum and standards of work should be made by professional educators, particularly teachers working at the school level. In a sense Picot acknowledges this by requiring national guidelines and a two year formal review by a central audit and review team.

2. Educational innovation will be hindered. Many community groups are by nature conservative and it would be very difficult for schools to introduce or even attempt changes that are inconsistent with the wider community. Certainly the introduction of taha Maori and the appointment of women principals are just two issues that have both deserved and required centralised policy.
3. Increased control by pressure groups. Beazley maintains that greater community participation will provide an opportunity for vocal, well-organised community groups to gain control of schools and introduce changes that may be both against the wishes of the majority and detrimental to the education of students. Interestingly, as has been pointed out, Picot argues the opposite.
4. There is little widespread demand for greater participation. Beazley quotes research from Western Australia which indicates that parents are concerned chiefly with the education of their own children and that they are not interested in participating in the management of schools. It is a further concern that even if parents have the knowledge and expertise they may not have the time or desire to participate in schooling effectively. At least there is a need for school based research in New Zealand. Certainly primary school committees have traditionally been difficult to fill in some schools.
5. Community involvement will cost a lot of money for little return. New Zealand parents have a proud record of volunteer help for schools. Picot claims that the proposals will not cost more money but, through efficiency, save money. However, all changes have a cost in financial terms, time, commitment and stress on the individuals involved. The concern is that an introduction of the Picot proposals without clear objectives and guidelines will simply involve more people in more work with little or no benefit to the students in classrooms.

Given the Picot argument, albeit one-sided, in favour of increased community decision making and day-to-day involvement in schools, teachers and administrators must face the likelihood of substantial changes to the way primary schools are run should the proposals be implemented. The implications for school principals, in particular, are far reaching.

Primary school principals will have little difficulty in agreeing with the Picot statements that the principal's role is 'often undefined and confusing', that principals have 'little or no specific training for their role' and they are often side-tracked from their important role of 'professional and instructional leadership'.¹⁴ The report suggests the role of the principal be as follows:

1. The initial preparation of the institution's charter consultation with staff and community.
2. The allocation of duties and detailed objectives among the staff.
3. The development of performance objectives and measures to assess that performance.
4. Ensuring that individual families are informed of the educational progress and achievements of the children.

With the exception of the first this is largely what principals do now. However, other duties will include professional advice to the Board of Trustees on such matters as appointment of staff, allocation of funding and building maintenance. Again with the exception of the first this is also what, principals do now. However, most principals will agree with Picot that the methodology will become more complex and require them to undertake tasks that they do not do now. What is proposed is a greater degree of localised decision making within nationally prescribed guidelines. Consequently principals must not only give professional advice but accept direction from local community representatives. More time will be spent as an education advocate and expositor. Schools will come under more intense scrutiny and school administration will increasingly require openness, democratic procedures, consultation and evaluation. Principals also will become more involved in local politics as they deal with conflict at local level without resort to the more

bureaucratic structures of the past that not only offered anonymity but usually sound advice and national consistency.¹⁵

How will principals cope with the changes proposed? Many schools have already moved in the direction indicated and the process will be one of increased haste. For other more traditional autocratic leaders the role change will be more dramatic. Picot acknowledges the need for both support and training for principals. This is crucial. Extra clerical and accounting help will be necessary if the principal is not to be diverted from the main task of professional instructional leadership. A concern is that if this assistance is left to Boards of Trustees to employ it may be done haphazardly and with limited regard to the more important duties of the professional school leaders. It is suggested that the proposed national guidelines include a recommended job description for principals and clear recommendations for clerical hours and rates of pay.

Perhaps even more important is the training programme for current and future primary principals. In the past this has been poorly done and the fear is that a token programme may be used. The more obvious requirements of such a programme are readily identified office procedures, time management, financial accounting, report writing and interpersonal skills are examples that could be included. However, there are important philosophical and sociological issues that require examination and reflection.

Firstly the political implications of the report have already been referred to. Of course, the Picot report has political ramifications and principals have always been aware that schools are political sites where issues of social control compete with the concept of education as a liberating force. The concern is that under the guise of catering for individual choice the mediating effect of state intervention will be reduced and inequality between schools will increase. As schools increasingly reflect their local community they will also reflect the resources that that community commands and the status that community's values hold in New Zealand society. Fergusson, in a description of English educational changes, summarised the issue thus:¹⁶

Parent-power has always been an exceptionally ambivalent force, far more divided by interests of class, gender, ethnicity and region than united by the common interests of parenthood. In this lies both its danger as a potential source of grass roots popular political activity, and its attraction as an annexable and guidable support for policies derived elsewhere.

The Picot report advocates greater community involvement yet the argument here is that the report, if implemented, will be a source of greater inequality.

A second issue that principals need to address in their schools is the contradiction between decentralisation of power and real community control. A case study of decentralised educational decision making in New York City¹⁷ found differences between the two concepts. Under decentralisation authority is delegated to schools from the top down and overall objectives are determined by a central body that places high value on objectivity and impersonality in establishing standards and evaluating performance. Under community control authority is entrusted to teachers and administrators from the community group who give priority to localised concerns and who are more subjective, placing a high value on teacher performance that relates to community needs and expectations.

Furthermore decentralisation tends to remain, to a degree, organisation orientated with the selection of staff, for example, subject to objective criteria and credentials. Community control is more client-orientated, emphasising the satisfaction of individuals needs and appointing staff with political, as well as professional, considerations in mind.

Picot proposes a mixture of decentralisation and community control. The outcome will require schools with principals who appreciate the opposing forces and who can balance the contradictions with confidence yet sensitivity. Certainly without clear guidelines the opportunity for community conflict increases yet as guidelines are increased true community control is reduced.

A solution to this problem is elusive. Ramsay's research into successful schools is used as justification for sections of the report.¹⁸ However this same research raises a third complicating factor. Picot proposes that community involvement in 'real' decision making will improve schooling.

This is necessary it seems because so called egalitarian policies have failed to cope with increasingly clear-cut social class distinctions arising from the current crisis in New Zealand's capitalist economy. Ramsay's comments in his 'successful schools' research paper are interesting in light of his position as a Picot committee member.

As unemployment increases, as class and ethnic tensions increase in New Zealand, public awareness of the politics of control becomes essential. A useful beginning can be made in schools. When New Zealanders begin to realise that the calling of a refuse collector is just as honest and important as that of say, a lawyer, an important breakthrough point will have been reached. This fundamental change to school curriculum would, in our view, allow the school to perform a transformational role rather than being merely reproductive.¹⁹

One must admire the optimism and idealism of the statement but in a practical sense the reality is somewhat different. School principals work in schools that are part of New Zealand's capitalist class system. As such part of the school's function is to reinforce and perpetuate that class system. Schools will not be allowed to revolutionise society from within should such a thing be possible. As has been pointed out the decentralisation of decision making still contains a central power base. Under Picot's proposals school charters must be approved by the Minister, schools will be audited and reviewed every two years and the amount of funding controlled by Treasury.

All this is not surprising. In a capitalist economy real community control is not realistic. What Picot proposes is a system that gives people limited control while making them more accepting of other inequalities that, as Ramsay rightly argues, are becoming more apparent. What is required then is that school principals examine the Picot proposals for the hidden agenda. Perhaps our taken-for-granted view of the nature of schooling is being seriously challenged. Whatever the immediate outcome of the Picot report the issue of community involvement and power sharing in schools will continue to be a major concern.

Notes and references

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4. ibid.
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