Australian Journal of Teacher Education

Volume 4 | Issue 1 Article 3

January 1979

Australia in the 1970's : A Fertile Context for Educational Experimentation and Innovation

J. D. Bambach
Churchlands C.A.E.

Australia in the 1970's: A Fertile Context for Educational Experimentation and Innovation

by J.D. Bambach
Churchlands C.A.E.

The 1970s have provided a social, political and economic climate which has been conducive, in many ways, to educational reform. Social and technological changes have helped to foster attitudes which are tolerant of and sometimes encouraging towards progressive ideas and experimentation in education. Public interest in and concern, accentuated by the mass media, for what schooling is or is not doing had been reflected in political policies and government initiatives. There have been signs of a greater desire by parents, and to some extent students, to participate in policy-making in schools. In general, teachers have also shown in the 1970s a greater readiness than in earlier decades to innovate and to experiment with new teaching/learning approaches.

The 1970s have also seen a weakening of the stress formerly placed on conformity, and, largely as a result of migration in the 1950s and 1960s, there has developed a diversity of values in Australian society. Greater emphasis on personal choice, tolerance of differing viewpoints, closer human relationships, and the development of self-discipline and self-responsibility are trends in the wider society which have been finding some parallels in the thinking and approaches of educationists, teachers, parents and students. New educational structures to incorporate such trends have been and are being sought in the present decade. Some groups of parents and other citizens have set up their own schools as a direct result of dissatisfaction with existing structures.

Educational issues have been more prominent in political discussions, particularly during the federal election campaign of 1972. The Labor Party which emerged as the Government from that election had developed a programme of proposals which covered all levels of education. Commissions were set up by the new Labor Government to investigate the needs of schools and pre-schools throughout Australia, and to recommend action. The recommendations were of far-reaching significance for the development of educational experimentation and innovation. The money which was generated by the "Karmel Report" and the Schools Commission (for instance through its Innovations Programme) became "seeding" money which led to the increased growth of a variety of "community school" experiments throughout Australia.

State initiatives in the 1970s have encouraged closer school and community interaction. For example, Bjelke-Petersen, the Queensland Premier, announced in March, 1976 that the State Government had embarked on a new policy of making school buildings and grounds more freely available to community groups outside school hours, and that many future schools would be designed as community centres. Earlier in 1976 the Queensland Education Department had indicated that Newmarket High School was to be a prototype community school open to community use. The Education Department of Western Australia also took the initiative in encouraging community involvement in schools, in a different way, by announcing through its

official circular to schools in February 1976 that schools could henceforth establish School Councils, which would be composed of parents and other community members, as well as teachers, administrators and, in high schools, students. (Education Circular, Feb. 1976). The challenge has been taken up by schools such as Hamilton Hill, Wanneroo and Willeton State High Schools. The State Education Departments in Victoria and South Australia, as well as the Education Authority in the Australian Capital Territory, have also encouraged the establishment of Schools Councils or Boards. Such initiatives have been responses to a growing public interest in community involvement in schools, but have also assisted the further development of a climate for closer relationships between the school, the home and the community.

Greater freedom for schools to plan their own curricula has been one of the major factors responsible for recent community school experiments. For example, Freeman (the co-ordinator of Sydney Road Community School, established in Victoria in 1972) claims that the idea for his school experiment can be directly attributed to the granting by the State Education Department of such freedom to state secondary schools in Victoria in 1968. To Freeman and Hannan, teachers at Moreland High at the time, the idea of a small, separate school which could respond to the changing views and conditions of teaching and learning, and which could utilise learning possibilities of the community, started to loom as not only educationally attractive but also realisable.[1] The "school-based curriculum" movement gathered some momentum in other states where it also became a contributing influence on the community school movement.

The schools set up around Australia in response to the granting by the State Education Departments of greater curriculum freedom have been very largely teacher-initiated. However, the 1970s have also seen the develpment of parent-initiated schools (e.g., Coonara Children's Community School in Victoria, The Blue Mountains Community School in New South Wales, and Quintilian School in Western Australia) which have been reactions, by and large, to long-term limitations on the freedom of choice of school for Australian parents. In general, Australian parents have not sought the right to choose, but in the face of the availability in the early 1970s of Federal and State funds for parent-initiated as well as teacher-initiated innovations, some of those who have been concerned about the lack of choice have taken the step of setting up their own schools. For example, according to Herrington, co-ordinator of The Blue Mountains Community School, there was dissatisfaction in the early 1970s among some parents and others in Springwood and nearby towns in the Blue Mountains, because of the lack of school alternatives. The idea for the school began to take shape in 1973 when a group of people met and decided to form their own school co-operative society which would set up a school characterised by maximum parent participation and close interaction with the community.[2]

There have also been indications in the 1970s of a growing dissatisfaction with the isolation of the school from the community whose children it serves. Demands by parents and other adult community members for a share in the government of the

*1 Interview with G. Freeman at Sydney Road Community School, Brunswick, Vic., 1976. Catalogued in Churchlands College of Advanced Education Audio-Visual Centre (Reference code: Ch.Coll.A.V.C.).

2. Interview with B. Herrington by J.D. Bambach, at The Blue Mountains Community School, April 24, 1976. Catalogued Ch.Coll A.V.C..

school, and the fuller, wider use of its costly and varied facilities have become increasingly common and, in some cases, insistent. For example, parent pressure groups such as the Australian Council of State School Organisations, made up of representatives of the state school council organisations from each state, have been vigorous participants in the debate on community involvement. Since 1971 that Council had advocated, close home and school links, through a policy of regional control, community use of school facilities and parent contact. It expanded this policy in 1973, following its annual conference, by calling for fuller participation of parents and teachers on all bodies involved in educational decision-making and by requesting maximum devolution of responsibility to boards or councils composed of parents, teachers and students. It expressed the belief that these boards should be involved in making decisions about broad aims and objectives and all major changes, but did not consider teaching methods, timetables or precise details of subject content to be the domain of parents(ACSSO, 1973, p.2). In general, parents and parent groups are favouring, increasingly, more "open door" approaches in the school and community discussion, and direct as well as indirect parent participation in education.

The Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission (Karmel Committee) responded to these developments in its 1973 report by clearly stating its "belief in the grass roots approach to the control of the schools" and its conviction that "responsiblity should be devolved as much as possible upon the people involved in the actual task of schooling, in consultation with the parents of the pupils whom they teach, and at senior levels, with the students themselves"(*Schools in Australia,* 1973, p.2) It observed that "the isolation of schools is being questioned, as is also the idea that education should be confined to formal institutions and concentrated heavily upon those who have not yet entered employment"(*Schools in Australia,* 1973, p.13). It also noted that "antipathy towards and apathy about direct community participation in the governance of schooling is widespread throughout Australia", and it argued that "schools have much to gain from the involvement of the community in educational programmes"; and, while not denying the authority of teachers in professional matters, that "openness of a school to parents is a means of both extending its educational influence and of reinforcing pupil motivation"(p13).

The Karmel Committee also lent its support to the belief that "every member of the society has an entitlement to a period of education at public expense, and that those who leave school early have a claim which they should be able to take out at a later date". It felt that "the principle of recurrent or lifelong education has considerable attraction", and should include "all the formal and informal ways in which the community provides opportunities to its members to partake in activities considered valuable"(p15). Though not willing to be prescriptive, the Committee left no doubt that if favoured the idea of the school as the nucleus of a community centre:

> The Committee. . .values experimentation. Educationally, and from the point of view of efficient use of resources, it would make good sense to have the school as the nucleus of a community centre. Joint planning, and even conduct, of schools by educational, health, welfare, cultural and sporting agencies could provide additional facilities for the school, allow the community access to its resources, and thus generally increase its fruitfulness(p14).

The Committee's report clearly provided impetus to post-Karmel community centre/community education centre developments such as the Minto (New South Wales) and Angle Park and Thebarton (South Australia) centres. Furthermore, the

Schools Commission, three years later, in its Report for the Triennium 1976-1978 directly endorsed these developments when it stated that it "favours the approach adopted in the Angle Park and Thebarton projects in South Australia which conceive of the school as an identifiable part of a community centre"(Schools Commission, 1975, p.117).

The extent of the rapidly growing community education interest in Australia may be gauged, in part, by the appointment over the past five years or so of community education directors to schools or areas, and of State Education Department officials with particular responsibilities for community education and/or community involvement in education. The Australian Capital Territory (e.g., Community Education Officer at Western Creek High School), Victoria (e.g., Co-ordinator of Community Programmes at Huntingdale Technical School, and Consultant —Community Education, Victorian Education Department), Tasmania (e.g. Director of Community and General Studies at Rosny College), and New South Wales (e.g. Inspector of Schools, Community Involvement, in the N.S.W. Education Department) all provide good examples.

Responsiveness to change was one of the major values (the others being equality, diversity, devolution of authority and community participation) reflected in the framework within which the Interim Committee of the Schools Commission (and the Schools Commission since) sought to improve the overall quality of schooling in Australia. The "Innovations" aspect of the Special Projects Programme recommended by the Committee was based on the idea that effective, worthwhile change must be initiated by those involved in it. The Programme has been an important means of providing both a necessary financial support for educational "innovation" and also a challenge to teachers, parents, students and other community members to experiment. Projects supported under this Programme have included those which have aimed at: (1) bringing school, home and community closer together; (2) promoting the feasibility of recurrent education; (3) exploring ways of "opening up" the school; (4) involving students in decision-making; and (5) meeting the special needs of Aboriginal children and promoting cultural pluralism.

Schools and other educational agencies which have been recipients of what used to be loosely called "Karmel money" for innovative projects have included a variety of State, non-government, parent and teacher-initiated schools, many of which have been described as "community schools" (e.g., Victoria's Coonara Children's Community School, for its Community Education Centre; Queensland's Black Community School, for its efforts to meet the needs of Aboriginal children; and Tasmania's Tagari Project, for its explorations of ways to "open up" the school, involve the students and bring school and community closer), as well as unusual "non-school-oriented" experiments such as "Educational Smorgasbord", a project initiated in the North Coastal region of New South Wales.

In such ways, the Interim Committee and later the Schools Commission sought to encourage the "development of diversity in the organisational form of schools, in school-community relationships, and in the timing of educational experience". (Schools in Australia, 1973, p.12).

Its advocacy largely explains the significant increase from 1973 in the number of usually small non-government, as well as government, schools. The Committee openly declared its support for "a kind of non-government schooling in which new schools

radically different in sponsorship and educational approach from those presently existing will be eligible to share"(P.12). Many of the schools established in the mid to late 1970s have reflected some of the major Karmel Committee/Schools Commission values, and certain specific concerns which relate to important aspects of school and community relationships (e.g., the use by schools of the community's resources as a learning environment; the introduction of people and information from the community into the activities within the school; the provision by schools of services beyond those traditionally considered their role, the most extensive of which in Australia involve the offering of after-school and holiday programmes of a recreational nature; the use of school facilities by the community, and the "community within schools", which raises issues of decision-making structures and "power and authority" balances, and have important implications for a school's relationship to the "outside community" as well as to the way it operates).

Schools commission reports have encouraged school and community interaction, efforts to "facilitate the transfer of appropriate decision-making power to the school level", (Schools Commission, 1975, p.117) increased parental and community participation, and community use of school facilities. For example, the Commission, believing that "one major element in the context of change is the developing relationship between the school and the community" and that "it is important to the educational process that the interaction between the two follow positive directions" (Schools Commission, 1975, p.112) established a Study Group on "the school in the community", upon whose findings it drew for a significant section of its 1976-1978 Triennium Report. That Report made it clear that funding strategies over the triennium would seek to increase the momentum towards two developing models of community involvement. One model involved participation (e.g., through Schools Boards) of teachers, students and parents in certain decision-making areas such as educational values and objectives, the close participation of teachers, students and parents in the learning process itself was a part of the other model which "provides explicitly for initiatives which may change the nature of the school itself in order to involve the school in the process of social change"(p.113) The Report announced that at least ten per cent of the funds provided for developmental activities would be spent on projects submitted by parents or parent-teacher groups, and also that the Commission would endeavour, through its Special Projects Programme, to encourage "school-based proposals which attempt to develop community involvement". Where appropriate, the Commission would itself "initiate action-research projects to explore the possibilities of school-community interaction"(p. 117).

The 1979-1981 Triennium Report also supported community education, community use of school facilities, devolution of decision-making, and increased parental and community participation, on educational grounds. Community involvement projects were again to be assisted through Innovations Grants, the Services and Development Programme, the Supplementary Grants Programme, and the Special Projects Programme. As with the earlier Triennium Report, it favoured initiatives which increased parental choice, and it both reflected and fostered a climate for educational changes which incorporated school and community interaction as an essential element (Schools Commission, 1978). Additionally, and concurrently, the economic climate for schools has changed dramatically as a result of such government initiatives, with a staggering increase in federal government spending on schools from $99 million in 1971-1972 to $700 million (committed) in 1979.

Amongst the school and community projects which The Schools Commission has initiated and supported has been the joint Schools Commission-Burwood State College project which has resulted in the publication and dissemination of reports of several school and community case studies from around Australia. This has made a major contribution to the field, and could well act as a powerful stimulus to further and varied experimentation in community involvement in education. Recent publications by Burwood State College, as part of this valuable ongoing contribution, have included an account of current trends and developments in community involvement based on the earlier case studies, (Fitzgerald and Pettit, 1978) and a discussion paper on community involvement and decision-making in schools(Pettit, 1978).

Evidence during the past ten years of a movement towards greater personal involvement in community activities in Australia has been seen in the development of new social welfare groups, minority protection groups, women's organisations, environmental groups, consumer organisations, ethnic groups, community access, radio projects, as well as in the widening of the fields of concern of long-established social and political groups. This movement may be part of a cultural drift in Australia which could become a critical shaping force in community schooling. The ordinary citizen is becoming increasingly interested in "having a say" in what is going on in all areas of living. This has been reflected, for example, in a growing demand that parents and other community members should be more closely involved in the area of education. In the various States the importance of such involvement has been recognised in reports such as *The School in Society* (1968), in Tasmania, *Education in South Australia* (1971), *A Design for the Governance and Organisation of Education in the A.C.T.* (1973), and *The Community and its Schools* (1973 and 1974) in N.S.W., and the major state political parties have become increasingly committed to the policy of a more active role for the community in education.

Teacher organisations have been seeking to come to terms over recent years with the apparent inevitability of increased community involvement in education. For example, the annual conferences of the Australian Teachers' Federation in 1975 and 1976 dealt exclusively with this issue; their major concerns relating to community involvement in educational decision-making, the learning programme and school organisation. The reactions of many teachers around the country to developments in these areas have indicated some serious reservations and fears lest the professionalism of teachers be undermined or at least threatened.

Strong teacher reaction has come with discussion of the issue of school boards or councils. An interesting example is to be found in New South Wales where much debate followed the release of certain proposals in 1973 by the Minister for Education, (The Community and its Schools, 1973), for the establishment of school councils. Councils were to be composed of teachers and parents (the majority) and were to have the responsibilities for the development of policies, advice to the Principal on management of school policy, and some involvement in the appointment of the Principal. The proposals met with strong opposition from the N.S.W. Teachers' Federation which did not favour the involvement of non-professionals in the making of educational decisions, and feared that school boards would bring small bands of people with a vested interest in the *status quo* who would act as a barrier between the school and the community.[3] The Minister has since re-affirmed the traditional policy of

[3]Refer, for example, to Teacher Federation comments reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald,* 6th June, 1973, p.13.

allowing only qualified professionals the final decision on substantive issues, while at the same time recognising the need for community involvement in education. (N.S.W. Parliamentary Debates, 1973, p.533).

Many parents and teachers who have wished to become closely involved in educational decision-making and in school experimentation in Australia have found it a less complicated task in recent years to operate independently, outside the state education system and without reference to the state school teachers' unions. New school ventures in the 1970s have been able to depend on substantial financial help in the form of "state aid" from both state and federal sources, no matter what political party has been in power.

The political and educational setting has been conducive to the ready establishment of small "innovative" schools, often housed in temporary accommodation, particularly by middle class groups who have been able to afford to finance the establishment of the school projects and to pay the school fees (which usually have to be charged to supplement the aid). Alternative independent schools, many of which have been labelled as community schools, have been viable propositions in each state in the 1970s, as the author's Australia-wide survey has revealed. In some states, particularly Victoria, a sufficient degree of flexibility and freedom for teachers has apparently been possible within the state school system to permit the growth also of state community school experiments.

The "community school" movement as a systematic trend in Australia has been, therefore, very largely a "latter day" movement[4], belonging mainly to the 1970s. It owes its genesis to a variety of factors, as demonstrated to this point, not the least of which has been the political, economic and educational climate reflected in and often created by federal and state initiatives. The most significant initiatives have been those provided by the Karmel Report and the Schools Commission which together contributed the finance, philosophical underpinnings and challenges so necessary for effective school experimentation and the development of closer school and community interaction. The need has now arisen for an examination of the nature and rationale of the contemporary community school approaches which have emerged in Australia, and for an analysis of the community school concept which incorporate these. The author is currently engaged in these tasks.[5]

[4]It could be argued that many of the small rural schools and Mechanics' Institutes of earlier times in Australia were engaged in efforts to encourage community schooling, but not in the more conscious and systematic manner in which there have been experiments in the 1970s. It is also interesting to note that there was a school in Launceston, The G.V. Brooks Community School, which had definite community schooling goals some thirty years ago (It opened in 1948).

[5]The author has recently completed a doctoral study at Murdoch University, Perth, entitled "Current Concepts of Community Schooling in Australia : An Analysis".

References

ACSSO Policy Statement, Adelaide Conference Report of the Australian Council of State School Organisations, Section G, 1973

Australia, Schools Commission, *Report for the Triennium 1976-1978,* Canberra : Australian Government Publishing Services, 1975.

Australia, *Schools in Australia* (Karmel Report), Report of the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, May, 1973, Canberra : Australian Government Publishing Service, 1973.

R. FITZGERALD and D. PETTIT. *Schools and Community : A Growing Relationship,* Melbourne : Burwood State College, 1978

New South Wales, *Parliamentary Debates,* Legislative Assembly, 28th August, 1973, pp. 533-534

D. PETTIT, *Community Involvement and Decision Making in Schools* (a Discussion Paper), Melbourne : Burwood State College, 1978

The Sydney Morning Herald, 6th June, 1973, p.13

The Community and its Schools : A Consultative Paper on Regionalisation and Community Involvement in Schools, N.S.W. Education Department May, 1973.

The Education Circular, Education Department of Western Australia, February, 1976