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THE CHALLENGE FOR TOMORROW'S SCHOOLS:
LEARNING TO BE RESPONSIVE

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A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Auckland

1994
Changes recently introduced in the administration of New Zealand education were intended to ensure that schools would become more responsive to their communities. Many aspects of school governance were devolved from a central government bureaucracy to Boards of Trustees at each school and greater choice of school was given to parents. In this thesis I examine the assumptions underlying these policy changes and propose a model of the processes necessary for the development of school responsiveness.

The research progressed over four phases. In the first I survey beliefs and practices in 38 Auckland schools about the new school-community partnership established by the devolution of governance responsibility to the Boards of Trustees. This survey was followed by a second more extensive questionnaire survey on the same topic in ten of these schools. The role educational values might play in parents' choice of school and their perceptions of school responsiveness were addressed in a survey of five secondary schools in the second phase. The third phase comprised case studies of two schools which had contrasting community-school relationships. In one school the principal valued a close partnership with the community, yet the school roll had fallen steadily over a five year period. In the other school, which enjoyed a rapidly increasing roll, the principal believed educational decisions should be left to the professionals. The case studies investigated this apparent contradiction, that the partnership relationship between parents and professionals which was designed to increase school responsiveness appeared to be unrelated to roll trends, a possible indicator of responsiveness. In the fourth phase I describe and evaluate how the school with the declining roll attempted to become more responsive to its community.

The research results show that the concept of responsiveness contained in the initial policy documents was simplistic in that neither a community-school partnership nor school choice
was sufficient to improve responsiveness to the community. I propose a more focused concept of responsiveness than that contained in the policy documents and identify two critical attributes of this concept; the school's educational values and parents' concerns about school practice. Parents choose schools because they perceive that the professionals share their educational values. I suggest that establishing cohesive values, both between home and school and within the school itself, is educationally desirable and critical to achieving responsiveness. This cohesion, however, should be enacted in a way which respects the diversity within the school population if some students are not to be alienated by the values of the majority. The second attribute of responsiveness, acting on valid concerns of parents, involves parents in decisions about school practice of greatest importance to them. Vague calls for consultation on school policy do not achieve this aim. My proposed concept of responsiveness does not assume that parents dominate areas previously reserved for professional prerogative, but rather that parents and professionals jointly determine policy in those areas critical to achieving responsiveness.

School-community partnerships and school choice will not result in responsiveness unless they serve as catalysts for professional learning about the values and concerns of the community. This learning is enhanced if schools encourage parents to exercise influence and engage in joint problem-solving. Achieving school responsiveness depends more on the attitudes and skills of the participants in the partnership than on the structural changes enacted in the recent legislation.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A thesis is inevitably influenced by the contribution of others. I have been especially privileged by those others involved. Both my supervisors have a high level of commitment to scholarship which has assisted my learning throughout the project. My principal supervisor, Associate Professor Viviane Robinson, has provided a superb combination of intellectual challenge and personal support. She has invariably taken my thinking beyond the level I was able to achieve on my own. Her personal support has also been much appreciated. My second supervisor, Associate Professor Stuart MacNaughton, has been particularly helpful during the early surveys, advising me on cross-cultural issues and providing suggestions on the draft chapters.

Carolyn Beazley also provided invaluable assistance in conducting the evaluation interviews and final proof-reading of the manuscript. I am grateful to Judy Parr who assisted with the initial surveys and provided statistical advice.

A special debt is owed to the principals and staff of Forest High and Phoenix College. They were always welcoming, they provided documents and time whenever I requested them and they offered helpful comments on my analyses of the issues related to their two schools. Without their cooperation this research could not have been completed.

The financial assistance of the Ministry of Education is gratefully acknowledged. Brenda Liddiard-Laurent completed the final manuscript preparation expertly and efficiently.

Finally, I am indebted to the continuing support of my husband, Mike, who would have preferred I had not begun the project. Despite this, he has not only provided continuing personal support, but also edited my first draft.
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