

Record

80

File Number

10056

Author: Stratford, Brian Murphy, Peter

Title: The Gemini Project for Establishing a European Network for Promoting Parent Participation in School Management

Original source: Australian Disability Review 1-92

Resource type: Written

Publication Date: 01/01/92

Publisher info: -

Abstract

The Gemini Project is a proposal to establish a network of 'Parent Awareness Circles' in a number of European countries to facilitate the involvement of parents of children from minority groups - including those with disabilities - in school based decision making. As the decentralisation of school management is also becoming a reality in Australian school systems, issues raised in this paper are relevant to the Australian scene. Parents of children with disabilities, in particular, have expressed concern that the educational needs of minority groups will not be sufficiently protected if resource allocation is left entirely in the hands of school councils. **Keywords: Attitudes, Education, Community development, Families, School Age**

The Gemini Project for Establishing a European Network for Promoting Parent Participation in School Management

Brian Stratford and Peter J. Murphy

Editorial note

The Gemini Project, described in the following paper, is a proposal to establish a network of Parent Awareness Circles (PACs) in a number of European countries to facilitate the involvement of parents of children from minority groups, including those with disabilities, in school-based decision-making. As the decentralisation of school management is also becoming a reality in Australian school systems, issues raised in the paper are relevant to the Australian scene. Parents of children with disabilities in particular have expressed concern that the educational needs of minority groups will not be sufficiently protected if resource allocation is left entirely in the hands of school councils.

Since the late seventies, many school systems throughout the world have found that obtaining additional resources is very difficult. Some institutions have endeavoured to secure special assistance from social service agencies enjoying more favourable financial conditions than themselves. Similarly, parents and teachers have been encouraged to purchase equipment and resources through a variety of fundraising activities. Many of these initiatives have been successful but the resources generated have often been insufficient.

A decline in world economic growth and continued inflation will probably result in school systems receiving even fewer resources than they normally would annually request. Simultaneously, the expectations of the general public, regarding both the quality and quantity of social services available to them have increased. Social services which at the time were accessible to a privileged few are now considered to be the right of everyone.

The growing gap between the 'supply' and 'demand' for social services has created a politically volatile situation in some countries. Politicians are well aware that governments that do not satisfy the needs of the people are rarely re-elected to office. To resolve political conflict in the social service sector of their economies, many European governments have supported, over the last ten years or so, a new socio-political infrastructure designed to facilitate participatory decision-making.

Decentralisation of School Governance

Within contemporary society, people are confronted with a diversity of consumer goods that was unknown to their parents and grandparents, and are still regarded as luxuries by our East European neighbours. Modern communication systems and mass media

This article is made available by the Institute for Family Advocacy & Leadership Development
and cannot be used except for the sole purpose of research and study

have tended to promote this diversity. Furthermore, many consumer goods, often at a small additional cost, can be easily customised. A greater involvement of the public in school affairs, which is known as self-management, school-based management, Local Management of Schools (LMS), and collaborative school management offers parents an opportunity to customise the learning experiences offered by their neighbourhood schools. If parents desire special services or schools want to offer unique learning experiences, school councils and school governors are expected to obtain the necessary funds.

This new socio-political infrastructure, when viewed from economic, political and consumer perspectives appears to generate a multitude of benefits. Many people believe that school systems, for far too long, have been protected from the forces of the market place. These critics maintain this situation has resulted in a wastage of resources, low productivity, ineffective management and low staff morale. Under school-based management, these individuals believe such deficiencies eventually will be eliminated.

Another group of people, as might be expected, oppose strongly a greater decentralisation of school governance. These individuals perceive the new socio-political infrastructure as a Machiavellian strategy designed to increase government control over a nation. Encouraging social service institutions to become more independent and self-sufficient, these individuals maintain, reduces the political influence of social service organisations. If governing bodies or professional groups, associated with these organisations, support a political ideology different from that of the political party in power, their influence will decline as an increasing number of institutions become independent and self-managing. The new decentralisation movement, according to these critics, is a 'smokescreen' for applying a traditional political tactic of 'divide and conquer'!

Other critics have focused attention on the social and equity implications of decentralising social services. These individuals maintain that if school systems, as an example, are encouraged to develop independently, certain schools by the law of 'survival of the fittest' will gain substantive advantage over others. Within a short time, these critics believe, the wealthy will have access to a greater diversity of higher quality learning experiences and the poor will have access to fewer. If these perceptions are accurate, existing social, economic, educational, recreational and cultural disparities will widen in the future.

As the decentralisation of school governance movement gains momentum, planned changes will be necessary to ensure the needs of children from special groups, such as single parent families, ethnic minorities and low income families, are addressed adequately. Similarly, appropriate action must be taken to protect disabled children from being provided with an inferior education. If these children are to maximise their potentialities, learning experiences must be offered in the least restrictive environment.

Maintaining Equal Educational Opportunity

Parent involvement in school affairs is not a new phenomenon. Since state schools emerged in the nineteenth century, parents have been making a variety of contributions towards the schooling of their children. Often this participation in decision-making activities, although it appeared to be substantive, was usually mere tokenism. Until very recently, all important decisions within a school, were made by the head teacher or principal with input from teachers when considered appropriate. Participatory decision-

making in education has tended to be a philosophical ideal rather than an actual reality. In fact, most head teachers and principals have enjoyed levels of power and authority far in excess of individuals in similar managerial positions. Quite naturally, many school leaders are somewhat reluctant to share responsibilities with parents and teachers. Yet, research on effective schooling suggests that participatory decision-making enhances the performance of an institution.

Traditionally, parents who have been involved in school affairs have usually come from middle-class families. A knowledge of the school system, an ability to speak English effectively, confidence to speak at meetings and a desire to influence the education which their own children receive at school are common characteristics of this socio-economic group and are valuable assets for participating in school management.

People who have become involved in school affairs naturally take with them to any kind of meeting, the values, cultural norms, educational priorities and aspirations of the groups they represent. Consequently, decision-making activities, whether concerning marginal or substantive issues, have tended to be influenced significantly by middle-class mores. However, educational equality and social justice have been maintained in the past by head teachers, principals, professional associations and local government officials.

The new socio-political infrastructure established to facilitate a greater decentralisation of school governance reduces the influence of many interest groups and promotes the 'survival of the fittest'. Therefore, if the vested interests of the 'so defined' or 'self defined' middle-class parents, who tend to dominate school councils are not tempered with social empathy, equal educational opportunity may become a philosophical dream for many children.

Over the coming decade, state schools will become, if present trends continue, more autonomous and entrepreneurial. Middle-class parents will strive for their children to be admitted into only the best schools in the areas where they reside. How can equal educational opportunity be maintained under these conditions? One action strategy possessing significant potential is making parents of children from special groups and the parents of disabled children aware of the new socio-political infrastructure emerging in contemporary school systems. Another affective strategy is to encourage a greater number of parents from ethnic minorities, low income families, single parent families, as well as the parents of disabled children, to become more involved in school management. The children from these groups are at a greater risk when the law of 'survival of the fittest' becomes the philosophical foundation for state schools.

By possessing a greater knowledge of school systems, by becoming involved in school management, and by being aware of new educational reforms, these parents can sensitise the governing bodies of state schools to the special needs of their children. If a greater number of parents from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds do not become involved in school management, equal educational opportunity will not be maintained in state school systems.

Children with special needs, educational or otherwise, and children from diverse backgrounds cannot represent themselves or protect their own interests. Therefore, in order for social justice to be preserved and human rights protected, these children require people who are familiar with school systems and school management, to serve as their advocates. Action must be taken promptly due to the pace at which change is

occurring, to facilitate a wider cross-section of society becoming involved in school management.

The Gemini Project

Traditionally, middle-class parents, as noted previously, have tended to become involved in school affairs. Ample opportunities have existed for parents from all socio-economic groups to be involved in decision-making activities. Why have not parents from single parent families, ethnic minorities and low income families, as well as the parents of disabled children taken a more active role in the management of schools?

Of the factors which deter many parents from volunteering to participate in school affairs, some of the most important are:

- Limited knowledge of school systems;
- Lack of confidence;
- Scarcity of free-time;
- Insufficient knowledge of schooling;
- Cultural norms; and
- Marginal training opportunities.

A new boundary-spanning organisation proposed for European elementary schools, known as a Parent Awareness Circle (PAC), is designed to reduce these deficiencies and to facilitate a greater involvement of parents from diverse socio-economic, cultural and family backgrounds in school management.

Under the auspice of the Gemini Project, experimental PACs will be established at specific locations in Europe, namely Nottingham (England), Lisbon (Portugal), Paris (France), Rome (Italy), Praha (Czechoslovakia), Berlin (West Germany), Bruxelles (Belgium) and Oulu (Finland). All the PACs will serve as training centres for parents whose children attend elementary schools participating in the experiment. At least 30 per cent of the parents who participate in PAC activities will be from ethnic minorities, low income families and single parent families. A further 10 per cent of the participants will have disabled children in their homes.

The special training sessions offered by PACs will initially focus on the following issues:

- The organisation of schools;
- School management;
- School personnel; and
- New educational reforms.

All seminars and workshops will be designed so parents are actively involved in learning experiences. Case studies, role plays, computer simulations and school visitations will be introduced into learning experiences whenever considered appropriate. Visiting speakers and open forums will provide parents with opportunities to discuss contemporary educational issues. Also, parents will be encouraged to offer assistance in designing, developing, introducing and evaluating learning experiences. A collaborative approach to human resource development will be applied. Similarly cooperation, communication and consideration will be emphasised throughout all training activities. Headteachers, teachers and local government officials will be invited to attend specific seminars and workshops to share with participants their special knowledge and expertise.

At the conclusion of a series of learning experiences, parents who satisfy specific requirements will be awarded a certificate by an academically well respected European institution of higher education. Upon receiving this certificate, parents will be expected to offer, at their children's schools, several seminars and workshops on issues examined and discussed during PAC activities. Similarly, parents who complete satisfactorily a PAC program will be encouraged to become involved in school management at local, regional and state levels. Alumni will have access, circumstances permitting, to PAC resources, facilities, network services and learning activities.

All the elementary schools involved in the Gemini Project will be required to assign a position on their school councils to a PAC representative. Parents occupying these positions will be expected to inform PAC members of changing conditions at the school level. At least twice a year these representatives will deliver a brief report on PAC activities to school councils. A sound professional link will be established between school councils and PACs.

An IBM work station with PC facilities, consisting of a desk-top publisher, laser printer and fax machine, will be available to parents involved in PAC activities. This work station will enable parents to communicate with each other by Fax, E-mail and 'Talk-To' computer systems. All participants in PAC activities will be offered seminars and workshops to familiarise them with the facilities offered by the work station. Parents possessing minimal or no knowledge of computers will be provided with special learning experiences to assist them. These special workshops will encourage parents to work collaboratively.

A contemporary telephone and answering machine, a television module, a tape-recorder, a VHF unit and a 'teleconferencing bridge' will be attached to a work station to form a comprehensive telecommunication system. Any parent involved in a PAC activity or an alumni member will have access to this system for professional purposes. The work station and telecommunication system, whenever possible, will be located in one of the elementary schools served by a PAC.

All PACs will be linked to each other by the IBM work stations. At least once a month, parents will be encouraged to communicate with individuals at other PACs in the network. This new computer network will access PAC members to data banks in a number of European countries; will enable them to share ideas with peers throughout the European Community; will enable documents on new educational reforms to be distributed in European school systems; and will allow them to discuss contemporary educational issues with parents from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. This new network will nurture and promote the concept of a united Europe.

Both formative and summative evaluations will be undertaken throughout the experimental phase. Since limited knowledge exists on school-based management, regular appraisals are essential for modifying activities; for determining the effectiveness of learning experiences; and for justifying requests for resources and for discovering whether the PACs are functioning efficiently. Simultaneously, a number of exploratory enquiries will be initiated to investigate various aspects of school-based management and to study the implications of this form of management. The findings of these enquiries will be of greater value to those government officials, senior administrators and principals who have been assigned the responsibility of establishing school councils, school governors or school management committees. Many parents who

are presently involved or who are interested in becoming involved in school management will find the outcomes of these enquiries very useful.

A number of developing countries, e.g. Brazil and Mexico, are presently experimenting with various forms of school-based management. Most of these countries, due to a scarcity of resources, are unable to initiate research and development activities. Consequently, all phases of the Gemini Project will be of interest to people who are responsible for decentralising school governance in these countries. At a later date, if this experiment progresses as planned, senior educational administrators in selected developing countries will be offered access to this new-style professional network.

Conclusion

A greater decentralisation of school governance is occurring in many countries in all parts of the world. This new reform is welcomed by some people and feared by others. What impact this change in governance will have on school systems is unknown. According to some critics school-based management will promote greater disparity in society, the wealthy will enjoy more educational services and the poor will enjoy fewer.

The socio-political infrastructure being established to facilitate institutional self-management and to support the evaluation of the autonomous school, does appear to favour middle class and higher socio-economic groups. Furthermore the law of 'survival of the fittest' is without any doubt promoted by this new form of school governance. The adverse social consequences of this reform can be avoided by innovative thought and creative management. Action must be taken promptly, if a social crisis is to be averted.

The Parent Awareness Circles (PACs) and the European Network for Promoting Parent Participation in School Management are planned changes which possess potential for reducing some of the adverse social consequences of school-based management.

Hopefully, financial assistance will be secured for the Gemini Project to become a reality in the near future. More experimental ventures of this type are needed if a progressive and far reaching reform, such as school-based management, is to improve the quality of education available to all children rather than just the elite few.

Dr Brian Stratford is at the University of Nottingham, England. Dr Peter J Murphy is at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

Correspondence to:
Dr Peter J. Murphy,
Faculty of Education
P.O. Box 3010,
Victoria, B.C. Canada V8W3N4