

Boards of Trustees and School Principals: A Flawed Policy-Management Relationship

John Clark

The relationship between policy and management is an important one, especially where schools are concerned. Policy directions for schools need to be mapped out and administrators have the responsibility of ensuring that schools head in these directions. Although the relationship between educational policy-makers and school administrators can take various forms, one in particular has become a theoretical and practical orthodoxy in those countries which have been influenced by the economic reforms of the last twenty years. Nowhere is there a better example of this than New Zealand, where the policy-management separation is widely adopted. However, the type of relationship being promoted and adhered to is deeply flawed, and careful scrutiny needs to be given to it before other countries in the South Pacific follow New Zealand's lead.

Following his appointment as the new Minister for Education in New Zealand in April 1999, the Education Review Office (1999) provided Dr Nick Smith with a briefing paper which, amongst other things, expressed concern that many school boards of trustees were still failing to exercise proper governance of schools some twelve years after the boards were established under 'Tomorrow's Schools' reforms. An Education Review Office (ERO) spokesperson was reported (Norrie 1999a) as estimating that between 10% and 25% of school boards of trustees were struggling to do their jobs. So, what is the problem? At the heart of the matter is the sort of relationship deemed to be essential between boards of trustees and school principals. It is a relationship which, being deeply flawed, gives rise to an untenable and deeply problematic association between the two parties, and needs to be replaced by one built on a very different set of assumptions. Accordingly, this paper will set out the basic position governing the current arrangements, critically examine its underlying presuppositions, and offer an alternative account of how the relationship between boards of trustees and school principals should be formed.

Current Relationship

In 1987, the Labour Government established a Taskforce to review educational administration in New Zealand. Its report, *Administering for Excellence: Effective Administration in Education* (Taskforce, 1988) made suggestions about new administrative structures at national, district and local levels. At the local level, the basic unit of the proposed structure was the “individual learning institution”, or the school. Each institution was to be “under the overall policy control of a board of trustees – while the day-to-day control of the institution and implementation of the policy will be the responsibility of the principal” (Taskforce 1988: 45). This separation of roles between policy and administration was spelled out in further detail – boards of trustees would be “responsible for the broad policy objectives” (ibid. 45) while “the allocation of duties and detailed objectives among the staff, and the development of performance objectives and measures to assess that performance, are also the principal’s responsibility” (ibid. 51). In addition, “a successful principal is a professional and an instructional leader” (ibid. 51) and finally, “only the principal can make the final decision on professional matters” (ibid. 52). In short, boards of trustees would be responsible for determining policy while principals would be responsible for implementing policy and administering the school. Government’s response, outlined in *Tomorrow’s Schools* (Lange 1988), was to accept the Taskforce’s proposals. The Education Act of 1988 put these into legislative effect.

However, government became concerned that implementation of the new administrative arrangements was not proceeding as expected. Accordingly, a review team was appointed to inquire into the education reform implementation process. Their report, *Today’s Schools* (Review Team 1990:14) noted that there was “uncertainty over the appropriate roles for boards of trustees and principals within schools”. Several reasons were given for this, including (1) boards of trustees not coming to grips with their role as an employer and (2) principals identifying themselves primarily as professional leaders rather than managers (ibid. 18). Because of this confusion, the review team concluded that there would need to be “a further clarification of the relative roles of the

board of trustees and the principal within schools. This will emphasise the need for boards of trustees to be concerned with matters of governance and for principals to be delegated authority to manage" (ibid. 8). Thus, "for there to be effective administration at the school level, the distinction between operational and policy activities must be clearly defined" (ibid. 20). "The key role of boards of trustees is to develop policy guidelines, ... management of the school then becomes the principal's role, not that of the board of trustees" (ibid. 22). The sharp distinction drawn between policy and management could not be clearer. (It should be noted that there has been a distinct change in terminology. Whereas the Taskforce to review educational administration used the word 'administration' in a very wide sense, the Review Team employed the term 'management' in a narrower sense to mean control of resources, staff and finances. Thus, all teachers in a school might have administrative responsibilities relating to their classroom and the school; on the other hand, the principal has management control and decision-making powers over school organisation, processes and activities. From here on, given the importance placed on management rather than administration, the term management will be used instead of administration).

More recently, ERO's national manager of reporting services has been reported (Norrie 1999a) to be expressing concern that boards of trustees were still failing to exercise proper governance. The School Trustees Association General Manager "blames difficulties in establishing a clear split between responsibility for governing the school and responsibility for managing it" for some of the conflicts between boards of trustees and principals" (Norrie, 1999b).

The Underlying Philosophy of the Policy-Management Distinction

Despite its late twentieth century adoption by the education bureaucracy, the distinction between policy and management is not a new one nor is it without scathing criticism, although the official documents promoting the dualism fail to acknowledge either the origins of the dichotomy or its serious shortcomings. Sadly, its implementation is more a case of

ideological dogma than critical rationality. In short, those who promote the policy-management distinction are driven by a commitment to a set of economic beliefs which provide the foundation of programmes of political and social action rather than being open to arguments about whether the distinction is really appropriate for education.

In educational administration the policy-management dualism first gained currency in the early 1950s with those professors of educational administration associated with the theory movement. The development of a science of educational administration was founded on the principles of logical positivism, albeit a simplified and modified version of that espoused by the Vienna Circle in the 1930s (Culbertson, 1981). Logical positivism was characterised by the following:

- a distinction between science and metaphysics, insofar as physical objects can be observed and claims about them verified as true through observation whereas values, for example, are subjective preferences which cannot be objectively verified,
- natural science provides the paradigm for knowledge, with law-like causal explanations using hypothetico-deduction;
- the neutrality of the observer and the role of empirical observations as the foundations of knowledge.

The appropriation of logical positivism into educational administration was rooted in two sources. The first was selected ideas from the work of Feigl, a member of the Vienna Circle, while the second was the writings of Simon who introduced logical positivism into administrative thought. There appears to be little evidence that the founders of the theory movement (Griffiths 1959; Halpin 1958) read widely in the philosophical literature on logical positivism. Rather, the links are limited to Feigl's (1951) contribution to a symposium on the principles of theory construction in psychology and Simon's (1957) *Administrative Behaviour*.

For those imbued with the spirit of logical positivism, a sharp distinction was drawn between 'is' statements of facts and 'ought' statements of value: "propositions of fact can, at least in principle, be verified, but the propositions of value are in the realm of preference and cannot be

verified empirically" (Griffiths 1959: 17). To illustrate his argument with a practical example, Griffiths quoted Simon's (1957: 249-50) exemplar:

In the realm of economics, the proposition 'Alternative A is good' may be translated into two propositions, one of them ethical, the other factual:

'Alternative A will lead to maximum profit'

'To maximise profit is good'

For Griffiths and Simon, the first of these two sentences has no ethical context, and is a sentence of the practical science of business. The second is an ethical imperative, and has no place in science. Taken as a given, the strict severing of the 'is' from the 'ought' was to serve as a guiding principle for administrative practice in education. Policy was to be determined at the national level by politicians and at the local level by parents who, guided by what ought to be, gave direction to the aims of education. The school administrator, on the other hand, was deemed to be an expert on the best means of achieving the ends set:

A theory of administration can be practical only in a limited sense; it can permit us to declare that if you do X, consequence A will result; and if you do Y consequence B will result but the theory itself cannot give us information on whether consequence A or consequence B is more desirable for a given organisation at a given time (Halpin 1958: 9).

Although it is unlikely that members of either the Taskforce or the Review Team ever read the philosophical or educational administration literature on the is-ought distinction, it is very clear that they were influenced by the ideas drawn from logical positivism which are now so deeply entrenched in current official thinking about the relationship between policy and management. However, what seems to be glaringly absent is any awareness that the basic dichotomy and its derivative have long been the subject of searching criticism, and found to be seriously deficient. As a principle upon which practical action can be taken, the strict separation of policy and management is deeply flawed, raising

significant doubts about its validity as the basis for a relationship between trustees and principals.

Objections to the Is-Ought/Policy-Management Distinctions

Although various objections have been raised against the is-ought distinction (Hudson 1969), and by implication against the policy-management split, these will not be rehearsed here. However, it should be noted that such critical observations as, for example, the separation of ends and means is negated by means also on occasions being ends, and vice versa, have hit their mark.

The distinction between policy and management rests on a theory of language which strictly demarcates 'is' sentences from 'ought' sentences. The justification for this is as follows: factual sentences describe how things are, such sentences being either true or false according to the way the world is with empirical evidence usually allowing us to verify their truth value. Evaluative sentences, on the other hand, make judgements usually prescribing how things ought to be, but since they are neither true nor false but express what is thought to be right or wrong, good or bad, they cannot be objectively verified by reference to the world, being personal verdicts which attract other's disagreement. In short, 'is' and 'ought' sentences are logically distinct linguistic entities with the social practices constituted by them, such as policy and management, being demarcated accordingly.

Now, first appearances would suggest that there is something rather attractive about the claim, for who would deny that the following sentences seem to express different things, the first about what 'is' the case, the second about what 'ought' to be the case:

- 1 The principal allocated resources according to a formula which makes a higher per-student grant to science classes and a lower per-student grant to art classes.

- 2 The principal ought to allocate resources according to a formula which applies the same per-student grant to all classes.

First appearances can, however, be deceptive. Our language does not consist of a number of discrete categories, each logically distinct from the rest. What the demarcation of various types of sentences relies on is a marking out of their differences as the crucial factor. Clearly there are some differences between 'is' and 'ought' sentences but are these differences sufficient to justify the claim that the two classes of sentences are logically distinct? What seems to be missing is any recognition that there might be a deeper linguistic structure which, by virtue of their similarities, brings the factual and the evaluative together in a more complex and unifying relationship.

A Holistic Reconceptualisation of Language

We can liken our language to a spider's web. At the periphery of the web, the strands are attached to physical objects – a branch, window sill, door frame. These connections hold the web firmly in place. The strands radiating from the centre are linked to concentric threads, with the totality held together as a whole. So, too, with our linguistic network. At the periphery are our observation sentences, being true or false on each occasion of utterance. Sentences, such as 'This book is red', are the observation sentences which anchor the linguistic system to the empirical world. They carry the empirical content for the whole of the network. They are also theoretical because all observation is theory-laden. Observation sentences grade off into standing sentences which are increasingly removed from direct sensory experience. Standing sentences, being more theoretical, also tend to have more permanent truth values (e.g. Iron bars expand when heated). Our sentences, taken together, stand not in isolation but combine, in their various ways, to form a global network or seamless web. The sentential network is thus a single system, tightly bound in places, loosely connected elsewhere, but none disconnected from the rest. Observation sentences are located at the outermost boundary while other parts of the system – logic, mathematics, physics, ethics, aesthetics – are far removed from the

experiential edge: "The overall system, with all its parts, derives its aggregate empirical context from the edge; and the theoretical parts are good only as they contribute to the systemizing of that content" (Quine 1966: 56). Since the empirical content of observation sentences at the periphery distributes itself across the theoretical network as a whole, no hard epistemic boundaries can be drawn between different elements of the system. The distinction between factual and evaluative statements is misconceived. Far from 'ought' statements being untouched by the evidence of the senses, empirical evidence serves as evidence for the whole network including judgements. Although far removed from observation, 'ought' sentences are supported by and imbibe whatever meaning they might have, in the end, from the experiential boundary.

Linguistically, evaluative and empirical sentences appear to have a similar epistemological structure and this is not altogether surprising, given their common experiential origins. We are, therefore, mistaken in thinking that our evaluative understanding is logically distinct from our empirical comprehension, for our evaluative thinking is every bit as much part of our conceptual scheme as is our empirical content. The principles of our conceptual network apply uniformly across the various sectors of the web. Our evaluative talk, like empirical discourse, is not static but is a dynamic product in the flux of sensory experience and conceptual adequacy. The meanings of moral expressions are no more immune from revision than are empirical assertions, so there really is no strong distinction to be drawn, at least on the grounds of meaningfulness, between the 'is' and the 'ought'. In both cases, sentences can be revised or even discarded when moral and/or empirical theories are found to be deficient or in error. What we are left with is the epistemic similarity of theoretical and linguistic constructions of the empirical and evaluative. Not only does evaluative thought have a conceptual structure similar to that of empirical theory, it is also characterised by the same sorts of methods of reasoning employed by empirical explanation. Moral thought employs both inductive and deductive logic, hypothetico-deduction, supra-empirical virtues, feedback generated revision and so on (Clark 1997).

There is a measure of reciprocity between 'is' and 'ought' statements which renders the distinction untenable. The two are not mutually exclusive categories but are elements of a continuum. By virtue of being part of the linguistic system, 'ought' sentences contain empirical content derived from the observation sentences which are distributed across the network; empirical sentences carry with them an evaluative component since, when we utter them, we are of the view that they are the ones we ought to use because they best convey what it is we seek to express. In the end, it is not simply a matter of seeing some sentences as empirical and others as evaluative. Rather, all sentences contain both empirical and evaluative content with some, to varying degrees, containing more of one than the other.

Reconceptualising the Trustees–Principal Relationship

The logic of the policy-management distinction in education depends on the prior validity of the is-ought distinction but, since the latter is untenable, the former stands discredited. Rather than seeking, on ideological grounds, to sharpen the policy–management divide even further, official thinking needs to change so that the relationship between trustees and principals is founded on a more theoretically sophisticated account of the is/ought nexus. Trustees and principals alike have a legitimate interest in framing policy and managing the school, since the determining of aims cannot be completely divorced from the means of their implementation, nor is the selection of means devoid of judgements about which best achieves the ends. On some matters of policy, responsibility may fall on the trustees alone, on other occasions the principal (possibly in conjunction with staff) will formulate policies which are of no great interest to trustees, and sometimes all will share in the task. When it comes to enacting policy, the situation is similar. What this requires is careful and sustained negotiation by all concerned, conducted in an open, rational and critical manner. This move toward stakeholder partnership is gathering increasing international support. Teachers, principals and those responsible for the governance of schools see themselves, not in conflict, but co-operating to enhance the educational opportunities of the children. Rather than power residing with any one party, shared decision-making

is regarded as a fairer procedure for allocating resources and monitoring processes in collaboration with teaching staff (Beckett 1991; Capper 1994; Poster and Day 1998). This will not be easy, since it calls for skills and understanding far more demanding in terms of interpersonal relationships than those required where the roles of policy formulation and management are arbitrary and artificially separated. No doubt it will spoil the neat, orderly lines of accountability demanded by those who seek to impose the logic of logical positivism, but human affairs are far more complex than this outmoded and discredited philosophy suggests. There are no simple rules to be followed or maxims to be adhered to. Rather, the formulation of policy and its managerial enactment requires that members of the board and the principal enter into discussion to settle matters of policy, to determine what ought to be; no less is administrative performance a shared activity, even if some parties assume greater involvement than others.

If the ERO really wants to assist boards of trustees and principals to develop productive and lasting sets of relationships, it should begin by rejecting the ideology-driven formula of the state and begin to do some hard thinking about the sorts of complex relationships which ought to obtain between trustees and principals in the policy-management affairs of schools. Collaborative partnerships between those who govern schools and those who administer them are built on a number of important principles. First of all, there must be an equitable sharing of power so that all involved are able to make worthwhile contributions to decision-making. This requires conceiving schools holistically so that governors and administrators recognise the interrelatedness of policy and management and are able to take responsibility for reaching rational judgements in the best interest of all who have a close affiliation with the schools. Built into power sharing is a second principle, that of democracy. Policy makers and administrators must recognise not only that their deliberations ought to be democratically arrived at, with each participant having a right to be heard and their vote accorded equal weight but also, and just as importantly, that their decisions must also respect and take into account the interests of those to whom the decisions will apply. Arising out of this must come trust. Policy-makers,

often parents, and administrators, usually professionals, must accept the contributions and insights each has to offer. Policy-makers, as elected representatives of the parents, bring a wider perspective on the welfare of the children, the concerns of parents and the general interest of the local community to bear on matters pertaining to the school which those managing the school ought to take into account. Administrators bring professional knowledge and expertise of benefit to informed policy. Decisions are best made when all available information is openly shared, so that artificial barriers between policy and management are eliminated to allow for the free exchange of ideas. In short, all parties to decision-making must have confidence in the integrity and competence of those involved, being able to rely on other's commitments to the common good of the school community, and to act responsibly on delegated authority. Thus, collaborative partnership requires shared accountability for decisions reached and actions taken. Finally, and most importantly, there is the notion that the school is a moral community, directing its attention to the education of children. How a school is governed, organised and managed ought to reflect the principles of collaborative partnership, since these best exemplify the ideals of a moral community which is what our schools ought to be.

References

- Beckett, C. (1991) *Working with Governors in Schools: Developing a Professional Partnership*. Milton Keynes. Open University Press.
- Capper, P. (1994) *Participation and Partnership: Exploring Shared Decision-Making in Twelve New Zealand Secondary Schools*. Wellington: New Zealand Post-Primary Teachers Association.
- Clark, J. (1997) *Educational Research: Philosophy, Politics, Ethics*. Palmerston North: ERDC Press.
- Culbertson, J. (1981) Antecedents of the theory movement. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 17(1), 25-47.
- Education Reform Implementation Process Review Team. (1990) *Today's Schools* Wellington. (Lough report).

- Education Review Office (1999). *Brief to the Incoming Minister of Education*. Wellington.
- Feigl, H (1951). Principles and problems of theory construction in psychology. In Dennis, W. (ed.) *Current Trends in Psychological Theory* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. 174-213.
- Griffiths, D (1959) *Administrative Theory*. New York: Appleton Century Crafts.
- Halpin, A. (1958) *Administrative Theory in Education*. Toronto: Collier Macmillan.
- Hudson, W. (1969) *The Is-Ought Question*. London. Macmillan.
- Lange, D (1988) *Tomorrow's Schools*. Wellington: Department of Education.
- Norrie, C. (1999a) Close bad schools – ERO *Dominion*. 28 April.
- Norrie, C (1999b) Trustee boards struggling at school. *Dominion* 28 September.
- Poster, C. & Day, C. (eds) (1998). *Partnership in Educational Management*. London: Routledge.
- Quine, W. (1966) *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Simon, H. (1957) *Administrative Behaviour* (2ed) New York: Macmillan.
- Taskforce to Review Educational Administration (1988). *Administering for Excellence: Effective Administration in Education*. Wellington (Picot report).