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STUDENT REPRESENTATION
ON
BOARDS OF TRUSTEES
IN
AUCKLAND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Educational Administration

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New Zealand
1993

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ABSTRACT

The topic of this thesis is the contribution and effectiveness of the student representatives on a small group of secondary school Boards of Trustees in a New Zealand city.

The placing of a student on the governing body of New Zealand secondary schools was made law on October 1st 1989. This study, undertaken in 1991, the third year of participation, endeavoured to evaluate the working contribution of these representatives. Effectiveness was measured in relation to the expectations of the representatives themselves, their colleagues, and in the eyes of those they represent.

The literature review established that participation by students in school decision-making is necessary and commendable but difficult to achieve successfully. The New Zealand structure is unique; yet it is of a similar non-proportional, consultative nature to that in other countries and it was suspected that this model would suffer from the same difficulties as those overseas. These difficulties might include role definition, difficulties in communication and consultation, inadequacy of training for their role and objections to the presence of students on the boards.

A variety of methods was employed. The primary method used questionnaires administered to 16 newly appointed student representatives at schools in the Auckland area as a wide focus. Questions covered the areas of expectations, role, training, communication channels and limitations on student representatives' contribution to their boards.

The narrow focus observed the student representatives in the public aspect of their role at four large Auckland schools. Opinions of the students' effectiveness and contribution were also sought from their fellow board members and the student body being represented at each school. This was done by questionnaire and attitude scale respectively.

The two pronged investigation of wide and narrow focus sampling in the overall design provided the triangulation necessary to confirm the findings.

Major Findings

The study established that the role of the student representative is unclear to both themselves and those they represent. The role is also limited (illegally) by their fellow board members who place restrictions, "common sense" though they may be, on the contributions of the students, and often without the students themselves realising that their role has been restricted in this way. The student role tends to be more one of observer than participant.

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As suspected, effective representation by consultation is difficult to achieve. There was a strong feeling that the students should have a voice on the board but communication channels were difficult to establish and maintain and the student voice was seldom heard at board meetings.

Few student representatives reported receiving any training for their role. This must, in turn, reduce the effectiveness of the student voice.

Opposition to the presence of students on the boards was not obvious but methods were employed to restrict the participation of

the students in sensitive areas - such as staff or student discipline - despite such restrictions being illegal and in contravention of democratic and participatory rights.

The inclusion of a student representative on secondary school Boards of Trustee has proved popular with the student body. However the lack of training, and the covert opposition to such students severely limits their effectiveness. It is to be hoped that the recent law change, making their inclusion optional, will not see the complete demise of their contribution.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The topic of this thesis is the contribution and effectiveness of the student representatives on a small group of secondary school Boards of Trustees in a New Zealand city.

The Board of Trustees is a recent development in New Zealand education. The Curriculum Review, (1986) and then the so-called "Picot Report", (1988) called for a more community responsive school system whereby parents and pupils would have more of a say in what went on in schools : "The running of learning institutions should be a partnership between the teaching staff (the professionals) and the community" (Picot, 1988 p. xi). The resulting administrative structure included a student voice.

The placing of a student on the governing body of secondary schools was made law on October 1st 1989. This study, undertaken in 1991, the third year of student participation, endeavoured to evaluate the working contribution of these representatives, now that most of the implementation had been completed. If the student voice was making an impact on Boards of Trustees then it should have been becoming apparent after two previous representatives had established themselves in the role.

Although student government is well entrenched in American high schools and has become popular latterly in New Zealand, never, before 1989, have our students had a statutory right to a voice in school management. It was anticipated that measuring student representational effectiveness in this new position would be difficult but perhaps possible by comparing the expectations of both the

student representatives themselves and those of the students they represented. The opinions of other board members were also sought on the effectiveness and contribution of the student representatives.

Participation by students in school decision-making is a theme in the work of Treslan (1983) in Canada, Chavez (1985) and Nussbaum (1990) in America, and Crouch (1970) in England. They agree that such participation is necessary and commendable but fraught with difficulties. The New Zealand structure is unique; yet it is of a similar non-proportional, consultative nature to overseas models and the writer suspected that it would suffer from the same difficulties as its precedents in student representation on management bodies: difficulties in role definition, difficulties in communication and consultation, inadequacy of training for their role and objections to the presence of students on the boards. These themes emerged from the literature review and formed the basis of the research questions which were investigated.

Research Methods

Five research questions were formulated and a variety of methods was employed to investigate each question.

The primary research method involved the use of questionnaires which, after trialing on two previous representatives, were posted to newly appointed student representatives at thirty schools in the Auckland area shortly after their election. Questions covered the areas of expectations, role, training, communication channels and expected limitations on student representational performance.

This was followed by a second questionnaire which was administered eight months later and which asked similar questions

on the above themes with the addition of a follow-up telephone interview on the areas of training which the representatives would have welcomed, their views on inclusion of additional students on the boards and the actual limits placed on their own contributions.

A second approach was to follow closely four of the student representatives in the public aspect of their role. Four large Auckland schools were selected and the representative at each of these schools was approached to seek permission to have his or her performance monitored. Regular discussions took place and a record was kept of each one's representative activities around the school. The researcher also attended a number of board meetings where the representatives' contributions were observed and recorded. At two of these meetings, the actual utterances were charted along with those of every other board member in order to compare the relative oral contributions. These were later combined across the four schools and analysed.

In order to gauge the resistance to the presence of these students on these boards from other board members and their perception of the students' role, a third questionnaire was devised which the adult board members of the four schools were asked to complete. So few individual replies were received despite frequent appeals, that the results were combined for analysis.

A third feature of the study of the four schools was a student body survey conducted on a random cluster sample of over one hundred students at each school. This was designed to test the student perception of the role and the effectiveness of the student representative amongst those each represented, as well as the extent of support for the inclusion of a student on the Board of Trustees. The survey used a Likert scale format but was analysed question by question and school by school.

It was hoped initially to use a further check of the level of contribution of the representatives by content analysis of the minutes but this proved impossible owing to the abbreviated nature of such documents in most cases.

The two-pronged investigation of small-scale and large-scale sampling in the overall design provided the triangulation necessary to confirm the findings.

Assumptions and Limitations

It must be assumed that the researcher brings some personal perceptions to the study despite the attempt at impartiality. These perceptions may influence the observations without the observer's knowledge. It was hoped that the use of several overlapping methods would minimise this factor. Likewise the very presence of the researcher would have an effect on the performance being investigated so attempts were made to establish rapport with each of the students to eliminate this factor as much as possible. It had to be hoped that the presence of the researcher would not affect the interaction between the adult board members and the student representative to any significant degree.

It was calculated that the use of questionnaires at three stages in the research would provide valid data, owing to the random nature of the replies themselves in two cases and the selection of clusters of respondents in the other. This, however, is yet another assumption only.

Because it was physically impossible to be with even four student representatives for every second that they were performing their

Board duties, there are obvious limitations on the scope of this study. Therefore, it was decided to concentrate on one public aspect of the students' duties - their contribution to Board of Trustees' meetings, which could be observed at first hand. The students themselves reported on other day-to-day duties which they performed and their statements were verified by checking with other participants in such occurrences, where possible.

The four selected schools were chosen both for convenience, as there was a considerable time commitment involved in attending four board meetings per month, and to provide a consistency of subjects as well as a variety of subjects. Unfortunately, no single sex school or private school could be included in the intensive aspect of the study because either board meetings coincided or their student representatives had been re-elected for a further term of office. This admittedly may limit the study's generalisability to a degree. The limitation may be offset by the inclusion of the more general questionnaire data obtained from a wider sample.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter two, The Literature Review, summarises the background to the introduction of student representatives to New Zealand secondary schools, their role definition and the student representational experience at tertiary level both in New Zealand and overseas. Participation by students in school government at secondary level and the leadership training found to be necessary overseas for success in such positions is outlined. Finally, the current New Zealand position with regard to opposition to and support for student representatives leads up to a discussion of the major themes emerging from the literature.

Chapter three outlines the research design which centred around five research questions developed from the themes prominent in the literature review, discusses the ethical issues considered and details the research methods utilised.

The data gathered from both the wide and narrow focus elements of the study are presented in chapter four, together with the findings and implications resulting from each research tool. The conclusions and recommendations arising from the study are presented in chapter five.

In Conclusion

As the following chapters indicate, the inclusion of a student on the Boards of Trustees of New Zealand secondary schools has been a popular move with the student body. There have been “teething” and communication problems and some subversion of the contribution of the student representative in some places but, for the most part, the students have been accepted by the adults and apparently encouraged to participate fully in board discussions and actions, although the students’ actual contributions have been restricted by a lack of training opportunities.

The recent law change (Education Act 1989, amended 1 January 1992, s. 94B) which makes the inclusion of a student representative on the board now optional for secondary schools may result in the disestablishment of such positions. However, if schools take note of the wishes of their student body, student representation on Boards of Trustees will continue.