

The Problem With Autonomy: An Ethnographic Study of Neoliberalism in Practice at an Australian High School

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Resumen/ Abstract

Based upon fifteen months of ethnographic study of school reform in a single school site, this paper takes seriously Appadurai's (1996) plea for those researching the 'global diaspora of ideas' to pay attention to the semantics and the pragmatics of specific situations, as well as the contextual conventions, governing the translation of global ideals. Adopting this approach allows us to contemplate the ways in which beliefs and practices that are produced as part of a global swirl of ideas are adapted to meet local conditions. In other words it is study of neoliberalism in practice. As this paper shows, those keen on reducing the influence of a large education bureaucracy can all too easily lose sight of why this form of governance came into being in the first place. Through this paper I argue that a single-minded focus on neoliberal ideals caused various key players in the social drama discussed here to lose sight of the context in which they were operating and the pragmatic realities of running an education system that caters for a diverse population spread very unevenly across an enormous expanse of land.

The research is based on a naturalistic study of the organisational culture of the school I came to call Ravina High. Like all institutions, schools are both 'sites of struggle', and a 'field of forces', where structure and agency collide unevenly, producing unequal outcomes (Reed- Danahay 1996:4; Bourdieu 1998:32). What I witnessed in a humble Western Australian high school reflects the inevitable dialectic that arises between newly received systems of thought and local practices (Sahlins 1981:33). The resultant hybrid structures created high levels of confusion, mainly because a commitment to devolutionary practice had become so much a part of the accepted, conventional wisdom of the education system, people were not necessarily able to clearly acknowledge the limits of their own devolutionary reform. Thinking of Western Australia's government education system in the late 1990s as 'deconcentrated' rather than 'devolved' (Lyons 1985) acknowledges the realities of the local translations of a global grand narrative. If we accept the premise that 'globalization has not translated into homogenization' (Straight 2002:8), and that all of the grand narratives circling the globe will inevitably be transformed into localised renderings of their underlying concepts, then any devolutionary reforms absorbed into local education systems are bound to result in deconcentrated, rather than fully devolved versions of these systems.

Palabras clave / Keywords: school reform, local education system

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I. Autonomy as Commonsense

In a recent speech delivered by the Prime Minister of Australia at the Centre for Independent Studies, a pro-free-market think tank, John Howard (2007a) suggested that education debates across the globe have made it increasingly clear that ‘quality demands choice, diversity, specialisation, transparency and competition’. As has been the case since the economic crisis felt in many parts of the industrialised world in the 1970s, the Australian government’s education policy responds to the perceptions and realities of what Mr Howard (2007b) describes as ‘a world of intense competition for markets and for global talent’. It is a world in which, again in the words of the Australian Premier, a nation and its citizens has to work hard in order to earn a place in a fiercely competitive global economy (Howard 2007b).

The rhetoric is familiar to anyone involved in researching school reform over the past three decades or so. It is part of a political agenda that has aimed since the late 1970s at shifting the coordinating functions of society away from nation states and bureaucracies towards economies and markets (Pusey 1992:3). The agenda is often named and described as neoliberal, of which more will be said presently.

John Howard used his speech to the Centre for Independent Studies to signal to the Australian electorate his government’s desire to continue reforming schooling in ways that promotes access to a range of types of schools, greater support for developing literacy skills and to still higher levels of accountability in educational institutions – whereby they demonstrate their commitment to increasing literacy and numeracy among their student population. The reform of greatest interest for this paper was the Prime Minister’s avowed commitment to granting public school principals real autonomy over their budget and staffing. In a “doors stop interview” given on the steps of a public school in suburban Sydney, Mr Howard (2007c) asserted that

One of the things that we must do to maintain the strength of the government school system is to give individual schools more autonomy. Parents like that because it enhances the local identification with the local school. The more autonomy they have the less uniformity there is, the more people will support government schools. And we want to do that because government schools underpin the whole education system and it's very important that their quality and their appeal be maintained.

The comments were made in the context of an ongoing debate about the role of public schools in Australian society that has been prompted by a significant, long term flow of students away from government education towards fee-paying non-government schools, all of which are supplemented by significant funding from the Federal Government (Forsey, in press). What Mr Howard is clearly calling for is a reform of the state education sector that will allow government schools to act more like private institutions.

The Prime Minister’s remarks reflect what have become a set of taken-for-granted, commonsense assumptions about how public institutions should be run that have been circulating around the globe for close to three decades. Critiques of various

types of bureaucratic formations, which are viewed by many as inimical to liberty (Rose 1993), traverse political borders. The notion that large bureaucracies are not well placed to make decisions about the needs of individual schools, that school principals need to be empowered to decide how to meet local needs, how they should be resourced to do this and who they need to employ to help them achieve their goals, seem so obvious as it is almost an insult to one's intelligence to suggest it. But global ideals must always be translated into local realities, and while autonomy may be more workable in smaller nations with less widespread populations and a different historical landscape, as this case study helps show, the particular needs of the Australian polity continue to defy commonsense assumptions about the need for autonomy.

Ethnography provides a compelling means for studying policies in practice and this particular case study derives from a long term intensive study of a government school in which the principal took seriously the call for autonomy that had since 1987 been part of the rhetoric of the system in which she worked. The "action" for the dramatic circumstances described here took place in the late 1990s in a humble high school that I have come to call Ravina High, which is located in the heart of the city of Perth, the capital of Western Australia. While the research is in some ways a historical artefact, the Australian Prime Minister's recent comments highlight its continuing relevance. Assuming evidence-based policy development to be a desirable aim of public servants, this study emphasises a need for caution when proclaiming a commitment to autonomous government schools. As I show a single-minded focus on neoliberal ideals caused various key players in the 'social drama' (Forsey 2006; c.f. Turner 1974) discussed here to lose sight of the context and the cultural landscape in which they were operating. The pragmatic realities of running an education system, which in this case caters to a diverse population spread unevenly across an enormous expanse of land, make it difficult to realise an unswerving commitment to market forces. While devotion to equity is sometimes interpreted as promoting mediocrity at the expense of excellence, especially when the homogenising effects of a comprehensive education system are under attack, it remains one of the guiding principles of Australian social and political life (Bullock & Thomas, 1997:55; Pusey 2003: 45). As this study of neoliberalism in practice helps show the apparent commitment to equity evident in Australian society continues to make a difference; it impacts upon practice.

Practice is understood here in Bourdieun terms as a commitment to understanding social life in terms of the dialectical relationship between social structures, culture and human agency (Forsey 2007). Treating policy as a complex social practice that is 'negotiated and reorganized in the ongoing flow of institutional life' (Levinson & Sutton 2001:1-2) takes the researcher beyond textual analysis of documents towards a vision of policy as a social phenomenon occurring *within* cultural and structural frameworks that determine its general direction, if not its specific trajectory. As Wright argues, the aim for any anthropological study of policy is to detail the 'introduction of new forms of power encompassing both the discourses and actions of policy-makers and the lives of those they govern' (cited in Houtman, 2004, p.18). Understanding the dynamic interaction between culture, structure and agency that is part of our every living moment helps further our understanding of how policies develop and how these developments impacts on the workings of society.

II. Neoliberalism in Schools

As is the case in any school, the people working at Ravina High at the time of the study were responding not only to local needs within a state-wide education system, they were also part of a globalized pattern of educational ideals and practices. The Prime Ministerial proclamations discussed above help highlight the influence of currently ascendant neoliberal commitments to advancing human well-being through the promotion of individualism and entrepreneurialism. All of this against a backdrop of a privatized institutional frameworks supported by free markets and free trade (See Harvey 2005) that help shape the conventional economic and political landscapes of our time. The metaphor of landscape is drawn from Appadurai (1994) who visualizes globalization in terms of a flow of people, capital and material goods, of ideas and policies around the world; flows that are, of course, uneven in both volume and consequence. Of interest here is the global movement of ideas, which according to the rich visual imagery employed by Appadurai, as they cross national borders and embed into local social-political landscapes, they are necessarily adapted to fit local conditions. Not surprisingly in this reformation process they inevitably lose some of their internal coherence (p.36).

John Howard's allegiance to the autonomy of schools is neither novel nor new. On the global stage it was the British Government led by Margaret Thatcher that first articulated a coherent reform programme aimed at devolving power away from big government departments towards local schools (Whitty, Power & Halpin 1998; Walford 1996). In Australia, where state governments carry the main responsibility for running state schools, the state of Victoria led the devolutionary charge in the early 1980s (Chapman & Boyd, 1986; Gamage, Sipple & Partridge, 1996). In Western Australia, the self-government of schools has been a major policy goal since 1987 when a deceptively thin document titled *Better Schools in Western Australia* was released (Ministry of Education 1987). Produced under the auspices of a traditionally centrist Labor Government, the *Better Schools* booklet boldly declared that, 'whereas once it was believed that a good system creates good schools it is now recognised that good schools make a good system' (Ministry of Education, 1987:5). Congruent with the devolutionary thinking it reflected, *Better Schools* put forth two main reasons as to why school-based decision-making was superior to centralized approaches. Firstly, it was said to encourage increased levels of teacher professionalism. Secondly, because it carried the promise of being more responsive to local community needs, decentralization enabled schools to make greater allowances for the educational requirements of individual students.

Two statements contained in *Better Schools* are particularly intriguing in the way they illuminate tensions between equity and choice arising out of neoliberal reform. Under the heading "Selection of Teachers," this *Programme for Improvement* declares that, 'in order that schools may become properly self-determining, it will be necessary that they have the authority and responsibility to select their own teaching staff' (p.9). 'Equity' was the other key heading. In this section of the document, an interesting claim was made:



A State-wide system of public education has been established in which a high degree of uniformity (particularly in relation to the quality of teaching staff) has been achieved. Many of the problems arising from isolation, social diversity and mobility have, to a large extent been overcome. Clearly it is important to maintain this high standard and the proposals in this Report allow for this essential concern. (p.5)

The *Better Schools* document was a manifesto for action. A five-year plan was outlined, with the formation of school-based decision-making groups and devolution of teacher employment touted as two keystone components of the proposed reforms. Two decades later most of the major proposals are yet to be incorporated into the normal practice of government schools in Western Australia, and this is despite the fact that the reforms are so much part of the political commonsense and have enjoyed bipartisan support over this period. Contrary to the ambitious declaration that the problems posed by isolation, diversity and mobility have been overcome the need to maintain at least some semblance of equity across the state remains a live issue. This makes school autonomy almost impossible in a state the size of Western Australia. During my period of research I hardly ever heard this issue being raised, rather, it seemed to hover unacknowledged in the background. The case study also shows some of the other factors at play when a principal assumes almost complete control of the school she has charge of, the details for which are outlined shortly. Right now it is important to outline some of the structural realities affecting the dramatic turn of events described here.

III. Setting the Scene

Ravina High is one of more than 750 schools run by the Education Department of Western Australia (EDWA) across a vast state spanning close to a third of the Australian continent. Occupying a total area of more than 2.5 million square kilometres, Western Australia is the largest state in the Australian commonwealth. Despite seeming to have boundless plains to share, the vast majority of Western Australians huddle together in the south-west corner of the State. Close to three quarters of the overall population reside in the capital city of Perth and, as Tonts (2004) informs us in, attracting residents to many of the rural and remote towns strewn throughout Western Australia remains a difficult task for planners. As is discussed below, understanding Ravina High's status as a "good school" in metropolitan Perth is vital to comprehending the issues raised here.

For more than a century the provision and management of public schooling in Australia has been the preserve of the governments of the six States and two Territories that make up the Commonwealth. A number of commentators suggest that the demographic realities of urban concentration and vast areas of sparsely populated land in Australia were instrumental in the formation of some of the most centralised education systems in the world (Chapman & Dunstan 1990: 1). Harman, Beare and Berkeley (1991, 313) argue that the highly centralised State-wide bureaucratic systems were a means of ensuring 'equality of educational provision and opportunity, across vast geographic areas'. The strong focus of Western Australians on their capital city makes the provision of what is arguably the most significant resource – teachers – a difficult challenge, particularly in the state's rural and remote schools. As the Minister for Education during most of the 1990s acknowledged in an interview with a newspaper

journalist, 'filling 17,500 teaching jobs in 776 schools in a State as big as WA was very difficult' (Ashworth 1999, 22).

A time-honoured method for addressing the difficulties associated with recruiting staff to government schools involves making permanent employment contingent upon teaching in a rural or remote school for an extended period of time. The biographies of many of Ravina's staff reflect this strategy as most of them lived and worked in a rural town prior to being employed in Perth. In order to achieve the permanent status at Ravina High that many hold in high regard, they were required to complete at least two years of satisfactory service in a rural or remote school. An end result of these employment arrangements is that many of the State's rural students are educated by young, 'first year out' teachers (new graduates), while the city schools are generally filled with older, more experienced educators who have the option of remaining in the school to which they are appointed until their retirement day. Reflecting this situation, the average age of the teachers employed at Ravina in 1998 was 43.2 years.

As the above data suggest, while centralised employment aims at achieving equal distribution of teachers across the State, the system is far from equitable. The more experienced teachers are in Perth, there are more educational resources in the capital city, and, Perth students tend to perform better in public examinations than their rural counterparts. Additionally those metropolitan schools located in higher socio-economic areas tend to produce stronger examination results than those found elsewhere. As the next section shows, this reality creates conditions that demands reform but it also makes such reforms difficult to achieve.

IV. Neoliberalism in Practice

Ravina High is a government school located in the heart of metropolitan Perth. My research focused on the organisational culture of the school, paying particular attention to the worldview of teachers and their interactions with each other, the school administrators and the students. I sat in on numerous classroom lessons, and engaged in conversation over cups of tea and lunch in the staffroom and other social settings. I also attended the various meetings that punctuate the working week of key players in a school, including those of the Staff Association, the School Executive, Learning Area Team Meetings, Parents and Citizens (P&C), School Council and the Student Council. I also conducted more than fifty semi-structured interviews with teachers, administrators, parents and several students. Some of these interviews feature in the following discussion of Ravina High's programme of reformation in the late 1990s.

Because of its central metropolitan location, Ravina High was the sort of workplace where many teachers were happy to be appointed as permanent employees. Adding to the attraction of its geographic position, many of the school's teachers described it as a good place to work. 'It has a nice feel to it' said one of the teachers during a formal interview, 'the kids are friendly. The discipline problems you can count on one hand. We don't want for anything. It's a good school'. A survey I conducted towards the end of 1998 among the teachers and administrators of the school, and drew



a 59 percent response rate, reinforced this perception of Ravina High with 85 percent of the respondents choosing the descriptor 'friendly' to describe the students. One of the youngest teachers at the school described Ravina to me as the 'crusiest' and 'cushiest' school she had taught in during her relatively short career. She had no hesitation in linking these highly desirable aspects of her workplace to the 'niceness' of the students and her belief that they were so 'average'.

Consistent with observations of Ravina High being a nice, but somewhat mediocre school, one of the senior teachers described the school's culture as 'very middle': 'middle-class, middle achievement, middle effort, middle attitude. The kids I think share a general attitude that one needs to succeed but only just enough. Good enough is good enough'. The majority of Ravina High's teachers shared a similar view, readily acknowledging that students tended to sit on their laurels. It was a good school, but it was not an academic school:

We want the kids to be successful, but the large majority of kids that come here aren't in that mode. I think the majority wins out in the casual attitude to things, which outweighs the few that come from schools that have the attitude of 'I really want to be successful'. And the sad thing about it is that because the majority are pretty middling, that those who are really successful, they drop their standards but they still look successful because they are in this sort of, middling sort of attitude (Senior Male Teacher).

Grace sought to overturn this 'middling' image of Ravina High a process of reformation that reached its zenith in 1998. Making it abundantly clear that the school needed to focus its attention on improving its position in the aforementioned academic League Tables, Grace modelled Ravina High on the many private schools surrounding it. Grace changed the name of the school, introduced a specialist golf programme and promised to introduce in 1999 a second specialist curriculum focusing on science and technology. In keeping with the development of the specialist programmes, Grace had announced her intention to make Ravina High a 'boutique school' operating as an independent entity within the government system. Grace had also enrolled full-fee paying overseas students and had entered into a fee for service arrangement with a private language college for Japanese students to spend whole days in the school attending normal classes alongside Ravina's students. A computer training company had begun to occupy an under-utilised meeting room in the middle of the school. In exchange they offered the use of the computers installed there and the promise of training programmes for staff and students. Grace's approach was entirely consistent with those promoted by the Minister of Education in his earlier mentioned valorisation of devolutionary reform. However, as the year progressed she found herself drawn into conflict with increasing numbers of people. In the end, even the Minister himself was not prepared to support her.

V. Devolutionary Discontent

The first group that responded collectively to Grace's attempts to mould Ravina High into a private school were the parents involved in running the local branch of the P&C. The President of the group was particularly concerned. The President had the means to send her children to a private school if she wished, but she wanted them to have a government education because of 'the ways in which public schools are there for people'. Both she and the Deputy President of the P&C began agitating against what they perceived as Grace's elitist intentions.

In May 1998 Grace announced to the P&C her intention to form Ravina High into an independently run government high school, along the lines of charter schools developed in the USA (see Chapman *et al* 1996, 10). The minutes of the meeting of Ravina Senior High School P&C held on 8th June 1998 contain a seemingly innocuous statement about the President being nominated by the group to sit on School Council. This marked the beginnings of the President's deliberate opposition to the directions in which Grace was seeking to steer the school. Having been assured by executive officers of the governing body of the State's P&C movement that the School Council should be made up of parent representatives nominated annually by the P&C, the President decided to challenge the ways in which Grace had structured the Council up to that point. Firstly she ensured that she had an official nomination from the P&C, and from there her aim was quite straight forward, as she told me in an interview conducted some eighteen months after the event:

Well being a social worker and all that, what bugged me was that all of the people sitting on that committee didn't ask any questions. ... When it comes down to reality, you really have to ask them, 'can we fund it? Is this possible? Is it legal? Does it work? Is it good for our community?'

And people weren't asking those questions. And I wasn't going to sit down and not ask them, particularly when she said people have to pay. I mean this was the only public school in this vicinity. We have private schools all around us. Ravina was meant to service the community. And now she wanted people to pay, and that's how elitism starts.

While the President and the Vice President of the P&C expressed concerns to Grace about the directions in which she was taking the school from the middle of the year, signs of collective anger among the teachers took longer to develop. Consistent with research indicating that the status and worth of teachers is often 'defined for them by the qualities and characteristics of their students' (Hargreaves 1994, 217), the teachers were less concerned than the parents by Grace's attempts to emulate private schools. An organised response from the staff was not evident until August, when Grace attempted to break open the centralised employment arrangements that she felt were crippling her reform efforts. Specifically, Grace declared the jobs of three teachers to be open to a competitive application process, a move interpreted as an act of insubordination by her employers in the central bureaucracy. Grace was clear about why she wanted to take this defiant act. Firstly, in keeping with the *Better Schools* initiative,

and the later words of the Prime Minister, she wanted to be able to employ those who would best help her meet the needs of the school. Secondly, she viewed it as another opportunity for her to take control of the destiny of the school; an act she saw as entirely consistent with the devolutionary messages delivered to her from the central bureaucracy.

The three teachers most directly affected by these proposed changes were not only anxious about their jobs, they were also bewildered by the failure of either Grace or her Deputy Principal to consult them. One of them spoke of how exciting the proposed changes were, but in not being drawn into discussion about the proposals, she felt as though she had been 'kicked in the guts':

I am not opposed to change, and think the idea is really interesting. But why haven't I been asked about it? Why didn't Grace come and talk to me about it? I mean, if she is dissatisfied with what I am doing, I need to know about this. But no one has ever told me anything.

In conversation in the staff room with a second member of the trio, some seven weeks after she heard that her job at the school was under threat, she reflected on Grace's proprietary approach:

Grace doesn't seem to realise that it's like we are in the navy. We are on a ship that many of us are happy with, in a system that provides us with safety and security. Yet we have a captain who wants to lead us away from the safety of the harbour and on to the high seas, even though many of us would prefer to stay where we are. She wants to cut us adrift from the rest of the fleet and set out on her own.

'If we don't like it we can jump onto another ship', she suggests, but it's not as simple as that. For one thing we have to find another boat willing to take us on board, but then why should *we* leave? She doesn't own the ship. It belongs to the government. It belongs to all of us.

This penetrating reflection corresponded to an important ideological element of the struggle between a number of Ravina's teachers and Grace that was developing on another front. A dinner was held in November, which, according to Grace, was to reward staff after 'a year of achievement'. It was 'aimed at 'strengthen[ing] the sense of community among those working within the school, as well as the connections with the wider community'. First mooted by Grace at a meeting of the Social Committee that took place three days after the restructuring plans were announced, Grace put it to the group that the dinner should be something all staff members should attend. 'It should be as compulsory as possible', she declared. This suggestion irritated at least one of the teachers on the committee, who informed me that she was uncomfortable with the sense of proprietorship this symbolised. 'Grace does not own this school' she commented over a cup of tea in the staffroom, 'I happen to believe that we are part of a public school system and the bureaucracy is there to help protect that'.

Curiously, the District Union Organiser arrived at Ravina High on the same day that Grace approached the Social Committee about the possibility of a staff dinner. Not having heard from the local branch all year, the Union representative had decided to make what she thought would be a spontaneous and routine visit to the school. Ravina High quickly became the Union Organiser's 'number one problem school', and she relished the opportunities it gave her to not only act on behalf of her members, but also to critique the attacks on public education being made by those promoting

devolutionary reform of the system. With the encouragement of some education department officials, the Union began the process of lodging a formal complaint against Grace. The grievance was constructed within a legalistic framework, which raised concerns about public money being spent on a dinner for which Grace had not sought approval, and the enrolment of full-fee paying overseas students without going through the proper channels to do so. However, as the Organiser pointed out, these were not the Union's main concerns:

The big issue for us was taking people's jobs, not the bloody Principal's dinner; couldn't give a shit about that. But then the fact that she wouldn't enter into discussion, she wouldn't, and then she wouldn't even listen to the Department, because they were telling her to, she was not to advertise these jobs and then she was trying to find ways to get around them as well, so she started making their lives hard.

Threatening jobs and promotional positions was one of the major issues for the Union; consultation, or rather the lack of it, was another significant preoccupation. Flowing from these concerns, a formal complaint against Grace was lodged by the Union. A formal inquiry into her conduct was held at the beginning of the 1999 school year during which time Grace was forced to stand aside from her normal duties. Grace was found to be answerable to the three complaints laid against her and was initially demoted to classroom teacher. Following a legal struggle over her demotion, Grace's case was eventually settled out of court with her agreeing to accept a position of Deputy Principal at another school.

While Grace's idiosyncratic management style undoubtedly contributed to her undoing, it also raises a general concern that hovers over any attempts to decentralise large service-oriented bureaucracies. In concluding this paper I want to focus on what this particular case study suggests about the ways in which unresolved tensions between equity and academic excellence continue to impact upon the neoliberal desire to grant autonomy to government schools by decentralising and privatising these important public institutions.

VI. The Problem With Autonomy

Like all institutions, schools are simultaneously a "field of forces" and "sites of struggle" where structure and agency collide unevenly, producing unequal outcomes (Bourdieu 1998:32; Reed-Danahay 1996:4). Appadurai's (1996) urging of social researchers to pay attention to the ways in which global forces have to adapt to local politico-cultural landscapes if they are to have any impact, offers a productive means for analyzing these outcomes. This perspective is especially useful when it comes to considering the tensions between local and central control of employment, which was one of the major points of contention between Grace, the teachers and the bureaucrats.

Context shapes new policy just as much as policy tries to reshape the context. Ravina High's status as a good school located in the capital city of a vast and sparsely populated state is clearly significant to this dialectical relationship between policy and context. The implications for adequately meeting the staffing needs of schools located in rural and remote areas are obvious, but this does not necessarily make things any



easier to deal with for those charged with running the state's education system. Bullock & Thomas (1997:55) report a strong, if somewhat vague, commitment to equity in the Australian community. This creates a dilemma for educational bureaucrats struggling to locate enough people willing to work in particular rural schools even when they have retained strong central control over staffing. The problems become almost intractable when it comes to handing over autonomous control of employment of staff to individual school principals. From what I could glean from Grace's accounts of her contact with her line managers, they were simultaneously promoting the importance of schools selecting their own staff at the same time as they were informing Grace that she could not hope to have complete control over the activities of the school. Neither side of the conflict appeared to acknowledge, in any clear manner, the pragmatic realities of the situation in which they found themselves.

In arguing that academic analysis of neo-liberal reform is overwhelmingly negative and cynical, Larner (2005:17) urges researchers to avoid using standard mantras of national economic decline and the loss of social welfare. As she suggests, neo-liberalism is not a monolithic, "top-down ideological project," (p.12) rather it is a complex, multi-layered, multi-vocal, and deeply social phenomenon (pp.10-12). Larner's analysis hints at a general focus on "radical rupture" by social scientists interested in neo-liberal reform, that is, one that ignores the continuities that are part of any reform movement. Unfortunately, the important principle of continuity that Saussure (1959, p.74) identifies as forming the basis for change, is all too often missing from analyses of neo-liberal reform. What I witnessed in a Western Australian high school in the late 1990s, reflects the inevitable dialectic that arises between newly received systems of thought and well-established local beliefs and practices. (Sahlins, 1981, p.33) Neo-liberalism is not the only ideology in town. There are a number of discourses active at any one time, some complementing the dominant position, others seemingly competing with it. For example, a variety of recent publications recognize the important role played by neo-conservatives in promoting the neoliberal cause (Harvey, 2005; Larner 2005; Apple 2000). Olssen (1996) also helps us to identify classical liberalism as part of the mix, but the continued influence of Keynesian welfarism, or "embedded liberalism" as Harvey (2005) calls it, is barely recognized. A commitment to an egalitarian ethic has not been simply jettisoned in the rush to empower the individual to become an autonomous entrepreneur.

In other organizational settings Grace may well have enjoyed a far greater level of success, and as some local commentators suggested when her story was in the public sphere, she may well have been better off in private enterprise. However, it is also possible that the public servants in EDWA played quite an active role in the protection of the education system. Pusey's (1992) research into the influence of neo-classical economic theory on senior federal public servants in Australia showed that, in contradistinction to people in the financial ministries, those working in the service sectors, such as health and education, were more likely to have received degrees in the arts and humanities, than in economics. They were also shown to lean far more in the direction of communitarian rather than individualistic policies and practices. If this trend translates into the state public service then it is not beyond credibility to suggest that those employed as senior bureaucrats in the EDWA were intent on maintaining some level of commitment to comprehensive education.

But even if the level of ideological commitment to maintaining a welfarist logic in schooling was minimal, it may well be the case that in their role as guardians of the system they knew that simple aphorisms do not the real world make; that good schools in and of themselves do not create and maintain a good education system. They knew that if Grace was allowed to decide who she was going to employ in the school, that it would not be long before all of the “good” schools would demand this right and this would further complicate their efforts to keep some semblance of equity in the system. If only for political reasons, given the continued influence of rural electorates and the vague commitment to egalitarianism professed by the population at large, it seems impossible for politicians or their assistants to give free reign to what they might otherwise think of as eminently sensible policy. As has been shown in many instances across the globe, for most public sector institutions, radical privatization is not part of the agenda. (Beck, 1999; c.f. Rose, 1993)

Grace’s once described the Education Department to me as ‘a juggernaut sucking us dry of our resources’. It is a curious way of representing her supply ship. I have already argued that such views of bureaucracy are fairly orthodox in Western societies, but in their unrelentingly negative way, they lack subtlety and depth. Such stereotypes bring to mind Foucault’s (1980) analysis of perceptions of power, which he concludes are misguided when power is construed monochromatically as a negative force. While bureaucracies are unarguably a source of stultifying constraint, they are also a source of creativity that enable individuals to actively use a world that is using them. (Ortner 1989:18) Paraphrasing Foucault’s (1980:189) depiction of power:

What makes [the system] hold good, what makes it accepted is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.

In among all of the problems and difficulties experienced in schools, it is easy to lose sight of other realities. “The system” provides and creates careers, foster ambitions, promotes creative thought and offers teachers the structure and the space to work constructively both with students and with each other. This reality is conveniently ignored by the likes of the current Australian Prime Minister when promoting local autonomy as a panacea for what they perceive to be the stultifying effects of big government on schooling. The research reported here calls for greater subtlety in the practice of policy than appears to be evident in many parts of the globe, but certainly in Australia.

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