

Public Involvement in Public Education Do We Have It? Do We Want It?

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Although there is a considerable amount of literature on public involvement in Canadian education, the actual extent and efficacy of such involvement is very much in doubt. The literature provides three explanations for the lack of success of involvement efforts. The implications of these explanations are discussed and criticized. Their inadequacies lie essentially in their exclusive focus on the school as divorced from broader levels of discussion. Several such levels are then briefly examined to show how they might re-orient thinking about public involvement in schools.

Bien qu'il existe de nombreuses publications canadiennes ayant trait à l'engagement public en éducation, on peut douter de l'étendue et de l'efficacité de cet engagement. Selon ces publications, cet état de fait s'explique de trois façons. On discute et l'on fait une critique des implications de ces explications. L'engagement ne fonctionne pas parce qu'il est trop centré sur l'école et qu'il n'aborde pas de niveaux de discussions plus étendus. On analyse brièvement quelques-uns de ces niveaux afin d'illustrer de quelle manière ils pourraient influencer sur la façon de concevoir l'engagement public à l'école.

When I first became actively involved with schools (other than as a student, of course) increased public involvement was very fashionable. Many so-called reformers, myself included, felt that much more should be done to bring parents into the school. We attacked the schools as closed institutions. We thought that the community should have a major role in making decisions about school programs and policies. We thought that the schools could be democratized, curriculum made more relevant, communities revitalized. As will become apparent from other parts of this article, many writers and commentators seemed to take the same view.

A decade or so later I am much more sceptical. I still believe in more public involvement, but I am not sure it will happen in the way I thought it would. Taxpayers' revolts, calls for increased school discipline and the "basics" movement make me wonder if the results of greater involvement will be as positive as I once thought. I'm not even sure I know what "more involvement" means any more.

I do know that the Canadian literature on public involvement in education has not served us well. A recent review of this literature (CEA, 1981) reveals that it has been both narrow and naive. I will examine some of the literature on public involvement, comment on the assumptions on which it seems to be based, and point out why it is deficient. A broader and more sophisticated view of public involvement is necessary if we are to arrive at a more satisfactory understanding of what is possible and desirable.

INVOLVEMENT: A SURVEY

How much public involvement is there in Canadian schools? The answer to this question involves a certain amount of perspective, a case of the glass being half full or half empty. One way to describe it would be to say that the level is higher than might be expected by many, and lower than might be desired by many others. Saunders (1973) reported that only a few Ontario school boards, for example, had taken advantage of regulations enabling them to set up community advisory committees. Estabrook and Fullan (1978) found that about half of Ontario schools have some type of parent or community committee if one includes in this number the parent-teacher associations of the traditional kind. About a quarter of the schools in their survey reported some parent or community input into decisions about such areas as curriculum. Temple (1975) noted that some three years after the introduction of school-level community councils in Alberta, about two thirds of Calgary schools had established such councils. Work done for the Task Force on Public Involvement of the Canadian Education Association (CEA, 1981) indicated that many school boards had some sort of program which they thought of as public involvement.

The range of activities by which members of the public participate in schools seems to be very wide. Mentioned in the literature are visits to school classes (Cable, 1972), parent-initiated school advisory councils (MacIsaac, 1973), school-initiated advisory committees (Hoen, 1976; Lemire, 1973; Robinson, 1978), attempts to involve the public in setting school district educational goals (Greenfield et al., 1972), and comprehensive school improvement programs which include community involvement as an integral part (Selinger, 1977). On the face of it this seems like an impressive list. However, further inquiry reveals some less encouraging features. For one thing, the actual number of people participating in all these programs and projects for public involvement seems to be quite limited. The number of participants in involvement programs is usually small (Cable, 1972; North York, 1972). Studies done in Quebec (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 1978) estimated that about 8% of parents were actively involved on average in school committees.

Furthermore, the amount of influence exerted by the public through their involvement seems to be quite limited. Robinson (1978), Hoen (1976) and Dawson (1977) describe public involvement efforts in which the structures, once established, were denied any chance to do anything. A survey of parents in Montreal by Lucas and Lusthaus (1977) indicated that most saw the schools as unresponsive. Information provided to the C.E.A. Task Force indicated that most public involvement was at the level of information giving or receiving, and did not involve a decision-making role (Canadian Education Association, 1981). The most comprehensive evidence on this point comes from the work on the school committees

which have been mandated in Quebec. A study by the Montreal Catholic School Commission (1975) concluded that most school committees had little or no significant input into their schools. In studies of the committees done by the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (1978), well over half the parents on the school committees described their influence on schools as weak or nonexistent.

The general picture, then, is one of more talk than action, and of action which is of small import. We have a great deal of advocacy of greater public involvement, and, some might say, a reasonable number of attempts to promote such involvement. We do not have much evidence that many people are actively involved, or that their involvement makes very much difference.

THREE EXPLANATIONS FOR THE LACK OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Various attempts have been made to account for the state of public involvement. These explanations can be seen to be of three general types. The first type of explanation suggests that problems in public participation arise from differing ideas about the nature and purpose of involvement. For example, some people may advocate participation because it reinforces the role of the school in teaching democratic values, others because of a belief that citizens have the right to make decisions about the nature of schooling, and others still as a device to strengthen the credibility of the schools and obtain additional resources for them. Not surprisingly, these beliefs depend on one's particular position in the system. The Canadian literature indicates that for the most part, professional educators have tended to hold views different from those of nonprofessionals, such as parents or school trustees. Lind (1972), a journalist, and Burbridge (1972), a school trustee, both advocate community control of schools. On the other hand, a report by the Ontario Ministry of Education (1971) speaks of public involvement as a process of dialogue, while an official Montreal report (1975) proposes "co-management" of schools, with the precise distribution of powers left quite vague. Quebec's legislation on involvement, often seen as a model for mandated public participation, provides for a parent committee role which is purely advisory. These are the contrasting purposes and emphases, it is claimed, which are responsible for much of the failure of involvement efforts.

A second explanation offered for limited public involvement is the lack of interest or skill on the part of citizens. It is argued that most people are not very interested in being involved in the schools. The evidence on this point is mixed. Two Canadian studies estimate the proportion of parents interested in being actively involved in the schools at between a quarter (Educational Courier, 1975) and a third (MacIsaac, 1973). A study in British Columbia, however, found support from more than two-thirds of

parents for involvement at all levels of the school system (Wallin, 1971). The discrepancy in these findings might be explained by data produced by a poll done for the Canadian Education Association (Canadian Education Association, 1979). This poll revealed some interesting inconsistencies in public opinion about involvement. Half or more of those surveyed indicated that the public has too little say in how the schools are run, but fewer than a third indicated that they personally were willing to join a home and school committee or a school board. Thus, public comment about lack of involvement could be intended as a general complaint, but not as an individual commitment to playing a greater role. Such an interpretation is in accord with research on parental perceptions of schools which reveals that people's ratings of their own child's school were far more positive than their ratings of schools in general (Manitoba, 1975).

Closely connected to the claim of lack of interest is the contention that people lack the skills to participate effectively. Many of the studies of public involvement programs cite the lack of skills on the part of participants as a major problem (Campbell, 1978; Cwik, King and Voorhees, 1975; Smitheram, 1978). The argument contends that people who do not know how to lobby, how to write a brief, how to hold a meeting, how to set some realistic goals, etc. are unlikely to be able to participate effectively in settings which require these skills.

The third general explanation for the limited success of public involvement is the more or less deliberate obstruction by the school system. This explanation is surprisingly common in the literature, even though it is not always stated explicitly. Practically all of the work which describes actual experiences with public involvement of any sort cites resistance on the part of the schools as a major problem. Examples of obstructionism include administrators who refuse to allow advisory committees to make any recommendations (Hoen, 1976), or even to consider any issues of consequence (Schafer, 1972), school boards which ignore or contradict the opinions of public groups (Robinson, 1978), and teacher organizations unwilling to attribute any role of significance to community groups or interests. Several studies describe instances in which public input was only gained after substantial political weight was brought to bear by well-organized communities (Dawson, 1977; Robinson, 1978).

The attitudes of school administrators and trustees do seem to be very cautious about public involvement. Ontario school trustees and administrators, for example, wished to limit community involvement to the use of school facilities (Ontario Ministry, 1979). Estabrook and Fullan (1978) also reported that school administrators wanted to limit the public at most to an advisory function.

WHERE DO THEY LEAD?

These explanations lead to different policy recommendations. The claim that public involvement is limited by contrasting expectations yields the

suggestion that what is needed is better communication, after which each side will understand the other, and agreement will be reached. Thus, several studies recommend that public involvement programs should set clear goals and establish agreed upon procedures for involvement (Greenfield et al., 1972; Dawson, 1977; Estabrook and Fullan, 1978). Similarly, the proponents of the lack of skill argument recommend training programs. And the recognition of resistance by the schools brings demands for the suppression of this resistance. In the latter case, it is of interest to note that few specific suggestions are made. An attitude of "it's terrible, but inevitable" seems to pervade the literature. Recommendations typically take the form that "schools must become more open."

None of these remedies, however, is likely to be very helpful. All rest on important but unexamined assumptions which seriously weaken their force. The chief difficulty with the recommendation for better communications is that it presupposes a consensus view of schools. That is, the suggestion that problems in community involvement can be resolved by clarifying goals is based on an assumption that the goals of all interested parties are compatible. But what if differences of opinion among various groups are not the result of misperceptions of the other party, but of legitimate conflicts of interest? What if, at bottom, parents, teachers, students, and administrators simply have different visions of what the school ought to be? Insofar as this is the case, efforts to reach a better understanding, while perhaps worthwhile, are unlikely to resolve disputes among the parties. It has been argued that when goals are strongly divergent, obfuscation is an appropriate strategy in that it allows the institution to continue with at least a semblance of shared meaning. Such a semblance might well break down completely if the goals were subjected to too much clarification (Sharp and Green, 1975).

The explanations that posit a lack of skills or a lack of interest can be seen as opposite sides of the same coin – the former advanced, presumably, by people who are not very committed to greater involvement in the first place, the latter by people who wish to increase involvement and are looking for a way to do so. The differences in form do not disguise the fact that both see participation as something which happens within prescribed forms and structures. The lack of interest position is often asserted, for example, on the basis of poor parental attendance at school initiated meetings. There is generally little consideration given to the merits of this particular forum for participation in the first place. The evidence typically taken as indicative of participation suffers from the same error. That is, nobody contends that the amount of conversation about schools among neighbours, or the number of parents contacting teachers (or even the number of parents not contacting teachers because they sense that it won't do any good) can all be taken as indices of public involvement in education. That they are disregarded points to the narrow meaning given to the term "involvement" (Levin, 1975).

Similarly, the advocacy of special training for parents betrays the

assumption that their participation ought to be within the channels which are currently taken as normal. That is, they must be able to write briefs, to make articulate verbal presentations, and to deal with school boards. I would not deny that the skills are desirable, but it prejudices the issue to a considerable degree to insist that the only, or even the best, ways to participate are those determined by the school system, especially when many of these can arguably be seen as devices to inhibit participation, rather than to make it easier (Levin, 1977). Nor is it clear that training programs are effective in increasing participation. The evidence for the use of training is by no means compelling. Furthermore, there is the problem of cooptation. As people become increasingly familiar with the practices and procedures of formal organizations, there is the danger that they also become increasingly more comfortable with the assumptions which underlie these practices. In requiring bureaucratic procedures from those unfamiliar with them, we must ask whether the unforeseen result may not be to soften and diminish challenges to the existing order of the schools.

Finally, it could be argued that the explanations that cite lack of interest and skill do not really tell us very much. Why are people not more interested or more skillful? In a sense, these explanations serve as rationalizations for a particular course of action. The contention that parents are apathetic is not the spur to trying to overcome the supposed apathy, but rather an excuse for taking no further action at all. Similarly, the lack of skill claim becomes a weapon for treating members of the public as incompetent, and unable to represent their own interests. They can be justifiably ignored until they can meet a set of requirements which may be quite meaningless to them. From a political point of view, then, one could regard this second set of explanations for limited public involvement as rationalizations for the preservation of, if not the status quo, then something very much like it.

The third general explanation based on school resistance to involvement also has its limitations. There is an assumption, often unstated, in much of the literature that more public involvement is a good thing, and hence anything which acts to reduce that involvement must be a bad thing. Unfortunately the world is more complicated than that. One can support the desirability of greater public involvement and also see why the schools might well resist it. To insist that all resistance is a result of malevolence or manipulation by power-hungry educators is simplistic. One might contend just as persuasively that schools are genuinely trying to defend the interests of students, interests which they perceive to be threatened by more public involvement. The refusal of teachers to give in to public demands for censorship of textbooks, or to the restoration of corporal punishment or harsher discipline are examples of such resistance. At the same time, one could take a neutral position, namely, that it is to be expected that people will not gladly relinquish whatever control

they may have over their work setting, especially if they have had to fight to gain that control in the first place. After all, it is as reasonable for teachers to want more control over what happens in the schools as it is for the public to want it, or for others to want the public to have it.

The issue seems to lead inevitably to a question of values. For public involvement is not, as has been pointed out, sought only as an end in itself, but as a means to some other end, whether it be greater democracy, better schools, or something else. In actuality, however, it is not always clear that involvement will lead to the desired end, and it sometimes seems clear that it will lead elsewhere. To exemplify the issue in perhaps the starkest terms, do people have the right to organize a school which promotes racial hatred, or violence? This is a dilemma which confronts the advocates of greater public involvement. For the most part they (we?) have evaded it by supposing that their (our?) own values would inevitably be actualized by a school system with more participation, although we have no evidence to support this conviction. The literature on free schools provides an interesting illustration of the gap between the ideal and the actual, and the way the gap is handled (see Argyris, 1974). In any case, the charge that schools often make public involvement more difficult, even when their rhetoric proclaims the opposite intent, is not particularly helpful. Such an explanation may be less naive than the other two but, like them, it is incomplete and misleading.

A BROADER PERSPECTIVE

The reader turning to the literature on public involvement for guidance on these issues will be disappointed. Much of it simply recounts various public involvement efforts, some of which are deemed successes and others, failures. At the end of each story the author tries to explain why this particular project succeeded or failed. There is no comparative perspective, and little attempt is made to put issues of public involvement in a larger context. It is worth remembering that in many cases these efforts were never intended to be analytical. Their function may have been to provide support for a position, to bolster morale, to attack somebody else's practice or belief, or even to create good publicity. In this sense, the claim that the literature is narrow is not necessarily an indictment. Nonetheless, work which is generally ahistorical, idealistic, and focused entirely on schools is not likely to be very helpful in understanding the problems or indeed, the opportunities associated with public involvement in education. We are reduced to assigning credit or blame rather than suggesting better directions for educational policy.

What is meant by a broader perspective? I want to propose four successively more inclusive levels of analysis – each a wider ripple in the pool, as it were. Each has the potential to help make our deliberations about public involvement more reasonable, and, one hopes, more

fruitful. The four levels are: involvement and organizational theory; involvement in schools in comparison with other social institutions; involvement in relation to broader historical and social trends; and involvement in relation to speculations on human behaviour. The full implications of these levels can not be developed here; I am interested rather in showing some ways in which they might change the nature of the discussion.

The first level – the relevance of organizational theory – has been touched on in part above, in terms of alternative ways of looking at school resistance to public involvement. For the most part research has assumed that an organization's activity derives from its stated goals. Such an assumption has long been seen as unwarranted by organizational theorists (e.g., Perrow, 1972; Georgiou, 1973). Organizations are political, with policy decisions (and the actions required to carry them out) being manifestations as much of individual or group purposes as they are of stated organizational goals (Greenfield, 1973). Thus people in organizations often act to preserve what they see as their own interests. It should hardly surprise us to find that there is considerable resistance to what might well be seen as substantial change in the order of the school. What else would we expect? Instead of lamenting the failure of participation efforts, we might focus on the ways in which these efforts change existing patterns and thus create instability. Advocates of involvement could address the possibilities for avoiding excessive instability, or for providing compensation as an inducement to change. Perhaps more participation in one area could be balanced by greater professional autonomy in another. At the very least, we should not expect people to be happy about a reduction in their influence and independence.

The growing literature on adoption and abandonment of innovations in schools suggests that there is a kind of cycle in which a proposed educational reform is first seen as highly desirable, and then gradually forgotten (Aslin and DeArman, 1978; Lawton, 1979). Public involvement could be one of the playthings of the 70s, now to be forgotten. The sorts of approaches which create lasting and productive change then become a particularly important consideration.

Cohen (1978) has made the comparison between involvement in schools and involvement in other social institutions. He argues very persuasively that there is at least as much, and quite possibly more public involvement in schools than in comparable institutions. Public attitudes still have a considerable influence on school curricula, especially in such areas as languages or family life education; on school rules in regard to questions such as the length of the school day and school discipline; and on the organization of instruction, for example in the resistance to open area. It is hard to find similar examples in parallel institutions such as hospitals or social services. Witness the lack of success in establishing community health centres in Canada. If public involvement is already

greater in schools than elsewhere, its extension might need to be viewed as a developmental task rather than a matter of reclaiming rights.

The appropriate means of involvement is also an issue. There is already a political avenue for involvement in schools through local school boards, an avenue lacking in other institutions. There is some question, then, about the desirability of creating further routes for public access at, say, the level of the individual school.¹ Could this not result in a fragmentation, rather than a strengthening, of involvement efforts?

Similarly, we can usefully consider the general issue of lay decision making and participation from an historical standpoint. It has been argued that public schools were established to take the control of children away from parents (Katz, 1968), and to vest it in professionals. Certainly increased professionalization accompanied the growth of schools (Sutherland, 1976). We might then think of limited public involvement not as a matter of the corruption of some once-better state, but as a matter of calculated policy. We then ought to address the question of why such a policy might be regarded as inadequate, rather than assuming that more involvement is a good thing.

With due regard to the danger of making generalizations about trends or developments of this scope, we do seem to be continuing to experience increasing professionalization and specialization of social functions. Insofar as the trend is to put increasing responsibility for various tasks in the hands of specially trained, or at least specially certified, persons then the move towards greater public involvement in schools constitutes an attempt to reverse what seems to be a strong historical trend (Cohen, 1978; Von Hentig, 1974). Litwak (1970) and Eide (1974) have both pointed out that we are in the ironic position of having lay involvement organized and promoted by professionals, such as community development workers.

Of course, some advocates of public involvement are actually urging movement towards a very different society made up of small, "organic" communities. But a price must likely be paid for such a change, if it is possible at all. If greater participation requires substantial changes in social organization, it may well mean significant changes as well in the distribution of rewards in society, or a general decrease in the level of affluence, and increased parochialism. Greater participation may be purchased only at the cost of slower decision making (consider, for example, the effect of complicated municipal zoning upon housing). Greater participation may lead to more conflict, or at least more open conflict. One could contend that the price is worth paying, and that it should be paid. But this is a very different argument from the usual "have-our-cake-and-eat-it-too" argument for participation.

Finally, it is worth asking how an argument for greater public involvement is affected by a less optimistic view of human behaviour. It is not a given after all that participation brings out the best in all parties.

There are costs for involvement in both time and emotional commitment. Those with better resources may be more effective in their participation. Some people may not want to participate at all. People may resent their lack of skills (Momsbridge, 1973). Communities could fragment. Greater involvement can just as easily bring problems as benefits. Consider this prediction:

When planning will have been democratized, the majority will realize the price which must be paid for this privilege; long work hours and, even so, premature decisions and unsatisfying compromises; exposure to constant contention and no applause; heavy responsibility and sacrifice of one's own interests and creativity to group dynamics or to the conceits and inferiority complexes of others, who have more time because they have fewer ideas, tasks, and priorities. (Von Hentig, 1974, p. 286)

IMPLICATIONS

The preceding provides only a rough sketch of the kinds of considerations which ought to inform our thinking about public involvement in education. Clearly there is much work to be done to develop more fully the implications of these broader levels of analysis for researchers, educators, and the public, whatever their current position on the issue of participation.

But at this point, it is clear that the consideration of public involvement requires a stronger and more articulated theoretical base. We will make no progress in our understanding unless it is linked more explicitly with ideas about people, organizations, history, and the interaction among them. It is not simply a matter of deciding what worked and what did not. We must ask why involvement is desirable in the first place, what might be considered a successful effort, and what the place of schools is in the broader social context.

The impact of involvement on organizational structures, and on the attitudes of various actors towards a greater public role must be examined. The nature of involvement needs to be considered as an outcome of often implicit assumptions of various parties as to what involvement means. Public involvement in schools needs to be seen in the comparative framework of other institutions. What is it that makes schools different from hospitals or social services in terms of the public's role? Historical studies which trace the public's role in education might help to answer such a question. In short, there is room for the productive study of public involvement, provided that the work is intellectually more comprehensive than much of what has gone before. We will learn little from further case studies of failure, or from the cries of unhappy citizens. Instead, the entire issue of public involvement needs to be considered from a broader, but also more carefully developed, viewpoint.

For those concerned with involvement at a practical level, the argu-

ments in this article suggest the need to rethink many aspects of involvement. Some might read these pages as suggesting that public involvement is simply too difficult – that it cannot be done. Such a message is unintended. Indeed, I would be pleased to find compelling arguments which suggest that greater involvement is both worthwhile and feasible. However, support for an idea is not the same as blind adherence. As long as public involvement is assumed to be a self-evident good, opposed only by reactionaries or on grounds of strict self-interest, no headway is likely. Good intentions are not an excuse for fuzzy thinking. There needs to be less rhetorical discussion of the issues. Advocates of public involvement continue to suppose that involvement is always and necessarily a good thing, and as long as others see such advocates as hopelessly naive idealists, we will limit discussion of the issue in the future as we have in the past. But by broadening our conception of what public involvement might be, of how it could be organized, and of the results which might ensue, we may be able to make the enterprise more productive and more challenging than it has been.

NOTES

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