Training Needs of Rural School Council Members

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Abstract

School councils have operated successfully in non-government schools for many years. By contrast, the establishment of school councils in the government school sector has had a much shorter history. In New South Wales, school council members are elected representatives of the broader school community. This study focused on government schools in rural areas of southern New South Wales and specifically examined the professional development and training needs of these school council members. The findings indicated that school council members expressed concern about their inexperience as council members. Further, they identified the following areas within which they should specifically seek professional development and training: i) identifying and analysing the educational needs of the school and its community; ii) enhancing and facilitating better communication between the school and its community; iii) assisting the principal to understand local community politics; and iv) promoting public education within the local community. These priority training needs have relevance for policy makers and professional development leaders at the systemic or departmental level.

Introduction

School governance is currently a matter of policy activity in most education systems in Australia. One key component of the school governance initiative has been the establishment of the school councils or school boards that have been assigned a variety of purposes, roles, and decision-making responsibilities.

The inclusion of school councils in government school organisational structures has a relatively short history – most states and territories have introduced school councils from the early 1980's onwards (e.g. Beare 1984, Moon 1989, South Australian Department of Education 1990, Scott 1990). In contrast, the non-government or

independent school systems of Australia have included school councils or school boards as a central part of their organisation and management structure for a long period (Payne 2003).

In the New South Wales public education system school councils are a recent phenomenon. The origin for school councils began with the *School Centred Education* report (Scott 1990). School councils were envisaged as 'vital elements in building a strong infrastructure for schools' and as developing 'closer links between schools and their communities' (pp. 76-79). The establishment of school councils began slowly and, in some schools, was met with some resistance. In 1995 the New South Wales Department of School Education placed the formation of school councils on its priority agenda in response to this slow rate of establishment. This prioritising of school councils led to most schools forming a council. State wide, the number of school councils had reached 1537 in 1998 (Vinson 2002). In the Riverina region of New South Wales where this study was located, the creation of school councils was strongly supported with over 90% of Riverina schools having established school councils by 1994. In the New South Wales education system, various policy documents about the roles, functions and responsibilities of school councils and their members have stressed the benefits for schools and staff when parental and community input into the provision of education occurs (NSW DSE 1995, NSW DET 1998).

Literature survey

The creation of school councils or boards is a world wide phenomenon of the past two decades. In countries such as England, New Zealand, the United States of America, Canada and Australia, school councils have become important policy making organisations within schools. Over the past decade, most Australian states and territories have either promoted the establishment of school councils (e.g. New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia) or have enhanced the role and functions of their school councils (e.g. ACT and Victoria).

Two related themes in the literature were identified that had relevance and/or application to the current study. Firstly, the participatory and governance roles of school councils were examined, and secondly, the need for professional development and training programs to support the work of school council members in carrying out their roles was analysed.

Participatory and governance roles

Historically, community and parental involvement and support in schools was most frequently linked with school based Parent and Citizen, or Parent and Teacher

associations. Beare (1984) distinguished between two fundamental forms of parent support for schools. The first he identified as parental involvement which he defined as a partnership relationship between schools and teachers with parents and community where the latter are called upon to assist or help out with school based activities or programs such as volunteer reading programs, school excursions or fund raising through the P & C or P & T committee. The second form was identified as parental participation which meant that parents were directly involved in educational planning and decision making processes. It is within this form of involvement that school councils operate and their outcome has a direct effect on school ethos, climate, educational programs and the staffing profile for a school.

Hargraves (1994) refers to the type of collaboration required for effective school councils as part of the new professionalism. He argues: 'At its core the new professionalism involves a movement away from the teachers' traditional professional authority and autonomy towards new forms of relationships with colleagues, with students and parents. These relationships are becoming closer as well as more intensive and collaborative' (p. 424). Despite Hargraves assertions, Bauch and Goldring (1998) citing research by Eaton et al (1993) noted that parental attendance at school council meetings was poor, with principals and teachers dominating discussions. These authors attributed this low participation rate to the fact that 'parents trusted the school professionals' (p. 22).

Fullan and Quinn (1996) suggested two potential operational modes for school councils: 1) 'compliance orientation' where school councils are the result of a political agenda focussing on parental involvement and accountability matters, and their creation is an end in itself; and 2) 'capacity-building orientation' where school councils promote a stronger and deeper linkage between parents, teachers and the community, and whose focus is enhancing the quality of student learning. These authors, along with Beare (1984), argue that the latter mode of school council operation can lead to creating learning communities in schools.

Boylan and Davis (1999) analysed the similarities and differences between the roles and functions of school councils in Ontario province, Canada and New South Wales, Australia. They noted that in both contexts school councils were a recent phenomenon and their designated roles and responsibilities were remarkably similar. Feng (1997) observed that in many states and school districts of the Unites States of America, school councils have become part of the educational reform agenda for schools of the 1990s. Both these authors noted that school councils were expected to embrace capacity-building roles that were regarded as beneficial and to establish partnership relationships between the school and its teachers and their broader community (Beare 1984, Hargraves 1994).

Finally, Hofman, Hofman and Guldemond (2002) examined the impact of school governance structure on student achievement in Dutch schools. The authors found that when school board members were attuned to the school community's wishes, the decision making processes of the school board were more collaborative and a 'communal educational policy' (p. 268) evolved. How to develop the capacity of the school council members to achieve this essential goal of producing a communal educational accord was not identified by the authors. This training issue is explored in more detail in the following section of the literature survey.

Training needs

The second focus of the literature survey examined what research studies had to say about the professional development and training needs of and for school council members. This aspect of the literature survey revealed few studies which, in turn, suggests that this aspect of school council development is a neglected area needing further research.

The South Australian Education Department (1990) produced a policy document outlining the role of parents within schools and as a subset of this policy the role of school councils whose primary role was to advise the school principal on community views pertaining to current or topical educational issues. Within this policy document, no mention was made of the induction or training programs and their on-going provision for these elected school council members.

A similar scenario to that in South Australia existed in New South Wales with the *School Centred Education* report (Scott 1990). Government schools were required to establish school councils but the professional support for these new members to operate effectively was not addressed.

In contrast, the training needs of Victorian school council members were well supported through two independent state-based professional organisations. Both the Association of School Councils in Victoria (ASCIV) and the Victorian Council of School Organsiations (VICCSO) provided professional consultancy services and regular training and development programs to school councils. These services and programs were designed to assist school councils and their members to: i) operate effectively; ii) understand good school council governance practices; iii) equip members to become competent, articulate participants in educational debates and discussions; and iv) ensure that the school council members contribute to the decision making processes in their schools (ASCIV 2004, VICCSO 2004).

Set within a series of politically driven reform agendas in the British education system focusing on the local management of schools, Radnor, Ball and Vincent (1997)

examined the relationship between school principals and their governing body, the school council. These authors reported that principals perceived school council members, or governors, as 'an invaluable resource of information and guidance' (p. 213). Principals were aware of the lack of educational expertise that many of the school council members had and that this inexperience could create tensions within the school council. The authors observed that, despite their existence, 'the headteacher/governor relationship is formally very unclear and nowhere spelled out in Department of Education documentation' (p. 213). This lack of clarity created power situations and tensions between the principal and the school council with the principal often emerging as the most powerful school council person. On the issue of training and development needs for school council members, principals preferred to recruit parents who were employed in professional, managerial or business occupations or were early retirees or were articulate women who demonstrated these same skills. In this way the principals bypassed the need to conduct a training audit for these school council members and consequently develop a planned program of professional development addressing their identified needs.

Flaxman (2001) identified legislative changes within the American education system that directly affected school boards by requiring schools to 'provide funds to develop the capacity of both educators and parents for a productive collaboration' (p. 9). Flaxman asserted that, within these legislative requirements, opportunities to conduct needs analyses for school council members have been created along with strategies to provide the training programs required to promote these productive collaborations between teachers and parents. The author did not report upon nor suggest what were appropriate strategies to support, sustain and develop these school council members. Within the New South Wales context, comparable legislative requirements do not exist, yet the training needs of school council members still require attention and professional support.

For rural schools where school and community size are critical factors, Collins (2001) asserted that a 'healthy relationship between rural communities and their schools is crucial to school effectiveness and the communities' quality of life' (p. 15). He continued by identifying that the social capital within a rural school and its community was an essential component for developing the healthy partnership relationship. As part of this relationship, Collins (2001) identified fundamental capacity-building roles namely: utilising the members of the school council as community agency agents to recognise and infuse the culture, history, strengths, opportunities and resources existing within the rural community into the school and its curriculum on one hand while enriching the social infrastructure of the community on the other hand. Central to achieving these goals is the ability of school council members to identify these community traits and respond in productive ways to ensure

they are incorporated into the rural school. For this to happen, a professional training program to support school council members' endeavours is essential. Yet the literature on school councils does not provide guidance on meeting the training needs of school council members. Payne (2003) explored the changing perceptions and demands on schools as the 'consumerist attitude' (p. 1) of parents replacing the older family oriented views about their school. Payne sets this conflicting tension within a dilemma of school governance framework where the differing interpretations of what school governance meant to the diverse parties created the dilemma. Payne also noted that, in recent times, government schools were introducing school council governance structures that mirrored those found in Australian independent schools. Her research specifically examined power relationships within school councils and reported that '[school] councils often can't see the boundaries of their powers and don't know how to cope with the level of responsibility' (p. 2). This led to difficulties arising from the definition (or lack of it) for the roles of principal and school council. O'Sullivan (1998) provided support for Payne on this point when he reported on how these unclear power structures and relationships within New Zealand Boards of Trustees (school councils) adversely affected the day-to-day management of the school. Payne (2003) further found from her research that in the 14 case study schools professional development and training programs for school council members was a low priority: 'there was generally little emphasis on training or inducting new council members' (p. 6).

As education systems moved towards creating and enhancing school councils, defining their roles and functions, describing the responsibilities of school council members, and establishing administrative and reporting requirements for school councils, very little attention to providing professional development and training programs for these volunteer school council members has been mentioned in the literature. The exception to this situation is the on-going training programs offered by the two state-based professional organisations in Victoria, namely the Association of School Councils in Victoria (ASCIV) and the Victorian Council of School Organsiations (VICCSO).

As a result of identifying this lack of training and development opportunities for school councils members, the present study sought to explore the training needs of a sample of rural school council members located in the Riverina region of New South Wales. Within the present study the concept of capacity-building (Fullan and Quinn 1996) in which school councils seek to promote a stronger and deeper linkage between parents, teachers and the community provided an interpretative framework to examine the training needs of school council members to effectively and efficiently carry out their assigned roles. These assigned roles are identified in the next section.

The designated roles of school councils in New South Wales

Earlier work by Boylan and Davis (1999) and Boylan and Bittar (2001) has identified the roles and responsibilities for school councils in New South Wales. From these analyses, the school council's role encompasses five core educational areas:

1. Status. The school council has a clearly identified *advisory role* to the school Principal and/or other educational administrative groups.

2. Policy making. The school council develops aims, priorities and goals for the educational program developed and offered at the school.

3. Policy advice. The school council has an advisory role into the selection process for the principal and the setting of priorities for the educational resource needs of the school.

4. Budget functions. The school council's role is to work with the school principal to develop school budgetary plans that reflect the educational priorities, the strategies designed to meet educational needs and to achieve the goals identified in the school budget.

5. Accountability. The school council provides the primary forum and mechanism through which the educational goals and programs of the school, the plans of the school council and the achievements of students are made public to the community.

In addition to the roles described above, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training stipulated a number of other functions and responsibilities for school councils that included:

1. Management practices. Hold a minimum number of meetings per year with all meetings being open to the members of the school community.

2. Accountability. Communicate regularly with parents and other community members to seek their views and preferences with regard to matters being addressed by the council and promote the best interests of the school community

3. Representation. The minimum required proportion of parents elected annually as members.

4. Development/Training. Organise information and training sessions to enable members of the council to develop their skills as council members (NSW DSE 1995, NSW DET 1998).

Based on this comprehensive list of roles and responsibilities, the capacity for community members to effectively carry out these diverse designated roles is problematic. School principals might be able to bypass and/or minimise this issue if they can recruit school council members who, as Radnor, Ball and Vincent (1997) suggest, are professional, or managerial, or business people, or early retirees with a similar set of employment backgrounds, or articulate women with these same skills. However, in small rural communities such as those in which the present study was situated, the number and availability of such people is problematic. They represent a minority of the employment professions found in the local rural population. Consequently, this suggested 'opt-out' strategy is not a realistic alternate for rural schools. Thus, the provision of an on-going capacity-building program within which the professional development and training needs of school council members are addressed becomes a significant priority matter for effective school council governance.

Membership of school councils

In the Riverina region of New South Wales where this study was located, most school councils were formed in 1992. Typically, a school council consisted of 8 elected members with the school principal being an *ex officio* member. Of the eight elected members, the representation on the school council consisted of four parents, three teachers and one community member. In this study, students and non-teaching school staff were not represented.

The design of the study

The stipulated development and training responsibility assigned to school councils by the New South Wales education department provided the focus for this study (NSW DSE 1995, NSW DET 1998). The specific purpose of this study sought to identify firstly, the training needs of school council members by seeking their perceptions and views about their training and development requirements, and secondly, their responses to how effectively the school council functions and its benefits to their school.

Following gaining ethics approval for this study from both the New South Wales Department of Education and Training and Charles Sturt University, a purposive sample of small rural schools was selected. In this study a small rural school was defined as a school with a total student enrolment of less than 200. Twenty-eight schools were identified and eighteen responded producing a total of 96 useable surveys. All schools were selected from the Riverina region of New South Wales. The

schools included in this study were rural central (K-12) schools and rural primary schools that were classified as P4, P5 or P6 primary schools using New South Wales Department of Education and Training school classification criteria (NSW DET 1999).

Findings

All participants were asked to respond to a written survey. The survey addressed the training and development needs of school council members through the use of both open-ended questions and a question that asked respondents to rank order their training priorities.

Training and development needs
The rank order question on the survey specifically sought the views of school council members on their training and development needs. This question was worded: *In order to meet your training and development needs, could you please rank your top 3 priority areas (1=most important) from those listed below.* The school council members were asked to identify their top three priority training and development needs from the list of eight needs provided. In Table 1 the rankings by school council members to each training need are shown as percentages.

Training and development need	First ranking %	Second ranking %	Third ranking %	Not selected %
Goal setting	12.1	12.1	10.3	65.5
Identify/analyse the needs of the school community	43.1	24.1	12.1	20.7
Strategic planning	13.8	13.8	12.1	60.3
Meeting procedures	5.2	1.7	6.9	86.2
Financial management	5.2	17.2	13.8	63.8
Effective communication	10.3	5.2	12.1	72.4
Monitoring and evaluating school plans	8.6	15.5	20.7	55.2
Responding to Departmental priorities	0	6.9	5.2	87.9

Table 1
Training and development needs

The results in Table 1 identified that the most important and highest ranked training and development need for school council members focussed on strengthening their ability to identify and analyse the needs of their school community. This specific need was identified as the first priority by approximately two in five members (43.1%) and as a second priority issue by an additional one in five members (24.1%). Reflecting on Fullan and Quinn's 'two orientations' framework (1996), the respondents have drawn attention to the capacity building nature embedded in this priority need. The school council members have highlighted their primary concern and training need to become effective voices and representatives of their broader community constituents. This capacity-building or parental partnership need (Beare 1984) is one of the primary roles of the two Victorian state-based professional organisations dedicated to supporting school councils. The challenge and responsibility for the New South Wales education system is to determine how to provide timely professional development programs to support these school council members.

Other lower priority training and development needs identified included: monitoring and evaluating school plans; strategic planning; and financial management. In some ways, these latter three priority areas are interrelated and overlap in the sense that each school is required by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training to develop its strategic educational and management plan for the following triennium. Yet the expertise and skills required to develop this triennial plan are functions that require professional support for the volunteer community members of the school council. Otherwise, these members are placed in a position where their inexperience precludes their participation and input. This view reinforces the assertion made by Bauch and Goldring (1998) that 'parents trusted the school professionals' and did not feel capable of having an input into setting educational priorities for their school's triennial planning process.

The first four specified roles of a school council as defined by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DSE 1995, NSW DET 1998) describe its status, input to policy making, policy advice, and budget advice. All roles relate to how effectively the school council members can assist with monitoring current school policies, programs and plans, providing input into future school strategic planning and assisting with the development and allocation of budgets to school plans. The capacity-building orientation (Fullan and Quinn 1996) implicit in these roles emphasises the need to develop sustained programs of professional support for these school council members to successfully represent the broader community, effectively carry out their duties and efficiently perform in their assigned areas of responsibilities. Rural schools located in small communities, such as those in the present study, are sites where the issue of conducting a training and development needs audit is essential for school council members. These rural school principals do not have the luxury of recruiting

parents employed in professional, managerial or business occupations that Radnor, Ball and Vincent (1997) reported as a solution in the British schools studied in their research.

Three open-ended questions were included in the survey and these questions focused on identifying the school council members' perceptions of:

i)   areas in which the council functions well and how the school council has benefited the school;
ii) where the school councils should focus their efforts; and
iii) identifying the weaknesses and challenges facing school councils.

The school council members' responses to the first of these open-ended questions, *Where does the council do a good job and how does this benefit the school?* identified their involvement in the following aspects of the operation of the school council:

i)   seeking the views of community members and parents about school matters;
ii) reporting on school council activities to the school community; and
iii) promoting the best interests of the school within the community.

The responses of school council members provided further supportive commentary on the importance of identifying and analysing the needs of the school community as well as indicating the range of strategies that they collectively use to help meet this identified need from Table 1. They reported that the presence of the councils had increased the amount of communication between the parents and their schools. This communication provided parents with an opportunity to enjoy greater participation and involvement in the schools. Collins (2001) argued strongly that effective rural schools created a 'healthy relationship' with their communities. An essential determinant of this healthy relationship was good communication between teachers, parents and community members. School council members fulfill an essential role in ensuring full participation and representation of their community. The responses of the school council members to this first open-ended question provide confirmation to Collins' (2001) assertions.

Additionally, some school council members commented that their councils have assisted the Principal in working through community related issues by acting as the 'sounding board' before an issue becomes a school guideline or policy problem. As one member said: '*Attendance at meetings to give support to the principal in the financial and administration sector.*' The areas where the school councils appeared to view their contributions as most beneficial included: discussing problems within their communities, promoting community awareness of school activities, and supporting student welfare and discipline policy.

The third area revealed in their responses to this question, *promoting the best interests of the school within the community*, was identified as an essential activity where most members of the school council spent a great deal of time. Collectively, these three areas provided additional confirmatory support for the highest priority ranking reported in Table 1 focusing on the training and development need statement 'Identify/analyse the needs of the school community'. Collins (1999) observed that central to achieving these goals is the ability of school council members to identify these community traits and responding in productive ways to ensure that they are incorporated in to the rural school. For this to happen, a professional training program to support school council members' endeavours is essential. Yet as Payne (2003) noted, professional development and training programs for school council members was a low priority among the case study schools in her research.

A second open-ended question sought school council members' views on: *Where the school council should focus their efforts?* The analyses of their responses revealed that the majority of council members indicated two recurring themes as important focal points for their efforts: i) improving communication processes with their school communities; and ii) promoting the positive aspects of their schools within the broader local rural community. As one rural New South Wales council member wrote: '*promote the school to attract more pupils and promote policies that enable pupils to reach their full potential.*' These assertions reveal on one hand a training need for school council members to be able to identify and analyse the needs of their school community and on the other hand to be able to develop and implement responsive programs or actions to meet their school community's needs. Both of these aspects for the successful operation of the school council indicate that the members recognise their need to develop their capacity-building orientation (Fullan and Quinn 1996) to be more responsive to the voices within their local community and to know how to promote their school and its programs successfully to the local community.

The final open-ended question asked: *What are the weaknesses and challenges of school councils?* The rapid changes occurring within the educational sector were criticised by school council members because they felt they had not been fully informed of these changes, nor were they well prepared to deal with the backlash from parents with respect to these ongoing changes. Finally, a number of school council members identified the main challenge for their rural school council as being able to increase parent interest, participation and support for the school council. This was manifest through comments such as: '*community members are becoming hard to appoint*'; '*the challenge is to find new vitality to keep the kettle boiling*'; '*lack of parent support*'; and '*getting people to fill positions on the school council*'.

Bauch and Goldring (1998) suggested that one of the reasons why 'community members are hard to appoint' (school council member) could be that many

community members regarded principals and teachers as professional educators whom they trusted. Fullan and Quinn (1996) suggested that when a school council demonstrates a 'capacity-building orientation' then problems of poor participation may be reduced as the focus of the whole school community is on improvement of student learning.

The emergent training need from Table 1 and the responses to the open-ended questions clearly identified a training and development priority for school council members that should focus particularly on building their capacity to identify and analyse the needs of the school community as their top priority.

Conclusion

The aim of the school councils in New South Wales is to ensure that 'the whole community is involved with all the important decisions made by the school' (NSW DET 1998, p. 4). Further, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training stipulated a range of responsibilities for school councils that included: management practices; accountability roles; community representation; and, development and training functions. This study specifically explored the state of training and development provided to school council members so that they could become effective participants in the operation of school councils in the Riverina region of New South Wales (NSW DSE 1995, NSW DET 1998).

The findings on the training and development needs of members of rural school councils provide guidance to policy developers and professional learning providers within educational systems on firstly, identifying the priority concerns of school council members and secondly, developing on-going support programs designed to assist school council members in becoming more effective and productive contributors to the successful operation of their local school council. These school council members are acutely aware of their training and development needs in: i) identifying and analysing the educational needs of the school and its community; ii) enhancing and facilitating better communication between the school and its community; iii) assisting the Principal to understand local community politics; and iv) promoting public education within the local community.

The findings from this study confirm the work of Payne (2003) when she reported professional development and training programs for school council members was a low priority in the 14 case study schools in her research. The current study extended Payne's research (2003) through articulating school council members identified priority areas in which they sought training and development programs.

The challenge for the New South Wales Department of Education and Training is to develop and then implement strategies and support programs for increasing community participation in school councils, meeting the training needs of school council members and developing better communication systems with the local school councils either directly through its own training programs or indirectly through supporting the creation of new professional organisations for school councils, similar to those existing in Victoria.

While it is true that school councils have the potential to be key players in the New South Wales educational communities, there are still a number of challenges that must be overcome with respect to defining more clearly the roles and responsibilities of these councils (Wignall 1996). When an analysis of the responses from the members of the rural school councils that participated in this study and the two scenarios proposed by Fullan and Quinn (1996) was conducted, it was evident that the 'compliance orientation' has been met by all school councils and, in many schools, this orientation seems to be their *modus operandi.* However, there are some promising signs expressed by individual members of school councils. They envisage their school council can or will evolve into facilitators creating stronger and deeper partnerships between parents, teachers and their school community (Beare 1984, Hofman, Hofman and Guldemond 2002). Here, the 'capacity-building orientation' labelled by Fullan and Quinn (1996) has its origins and is evident as council members focus on i) improving the quality of education provided to the students, and ii) producing significant changes to the relationship between a school and its community as they work towards building a learning community in tune with the local educational needs of their rural communities (Senge 1990).

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