



Public or community education

by Rick Flowers

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I think there is a need to re-invigorate struggles to build a strong public education system for adults. It would be a pity if parts of the adult learning sector did not align with these struggles and championed only community education. I counterpose community and public education for the purpose of my argument although the terms have diverse meanings and can intersect. Many people say they do not champion community education, but learning in the community.

Public education stands for concern with equality, access and an inclusive curriculum embracing all classes and cultures. Community education stands for locality, diverse interest groups, choice and flexibility. (I'm being a devil's advocate).

In late 19th century NSW Henry Parkes fought for and won more public education. If it was apparent then that government provision would increase equality in formal education, today's arguments about creating greater equality in education are more complex. The relative contributions of community, private and public education are contested. Many community educators and workers see the role of government negatively. Many activists think education is best controlled by community organisations rather than government agencies. Some youth workers perceive schools as institutions that alienate and oppress young people. In this vein, the State is portrayed as being against the people's interests. There is a complex and dangerous collusion between 'progressive' activists and free market advocates who argue that public education is a sheltered workshop and more support should be given to private providers.

TAFE Outreach in NSW is one example of a public education provider for adults. It has a long and proud tradition of working with people and 'communities' who are poor, disadvantaged, 'at risk', and working class. As taxpayer support for public education and in particular for providers like TAFE Outreach declines, some perceive that community-based education providers can fill the growing gaps. But to what extent?

Who is championing public education? Who is championing community education? There are diverse interests at play. Many educators draw on the notion of 'community' when explaining why it is important to address inequalities, advocate for

the interests of 'disadvantaged' people and work for community development. But as many or more draw on the notion of 'community' to advocate de-regulating the education market and providing more freedom of choice.

In my street in Sydney there are six families with children of school age going to six different schools; a mixture of public, private and systemic. I suggested to my neighbours it was a pity we weren't all attending and supporting the one school. The response was: choice and diversity enriches our community and what a great democratic tradition Australia has to enable this.

A belief in choice (but for whom?) is one value that drives and shapes community education. A belief in partnerships and co-operation is another. The current and prominent interest in concepts such as 'learning communities' and 'learning cities' arguably reflects this. What assumptions and ideologies underpin these beliefs and values? Is it simplistic to suggest that community education is being used to foster a community consciousness that disguises conflicts of interest and distracts people from considering the material causes of conflict, poverty and inequality? It probably is.

Think of the Federation of Independent, Community Controlled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Providers (FICCAITSE) who intentionally set up community based programs as an alternative to the public education system. FICCAITSE could hardly be accused of fostering a community consciousness that distracted people from engaging in struggles for native title and land rights.

Yet it is possible to identify competing traditions behind community versus public education. Broadly speaking there is a tradition of advocacy for special interest groups in community education versus a tradition of seeking to engage with and include diverse groups in an inclusive and equitable curriculum in public education. There is a challenge to build stronger and closer alliances between those who are working in public education and those in community education and who share a common desire to work more effectively with people and groups who are poor or marginalised.