

STAFF UNITY, SCHOOL COHERENCE AND IN-SERVICE EDUCATION: A STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF A UNIVERSITY
COURSE DESIGNED TO SERVE SCHOOLS RATHER THAN INDIVIDUAL TEACHERS

L. F. Claydon
La Trobe University

Introduction

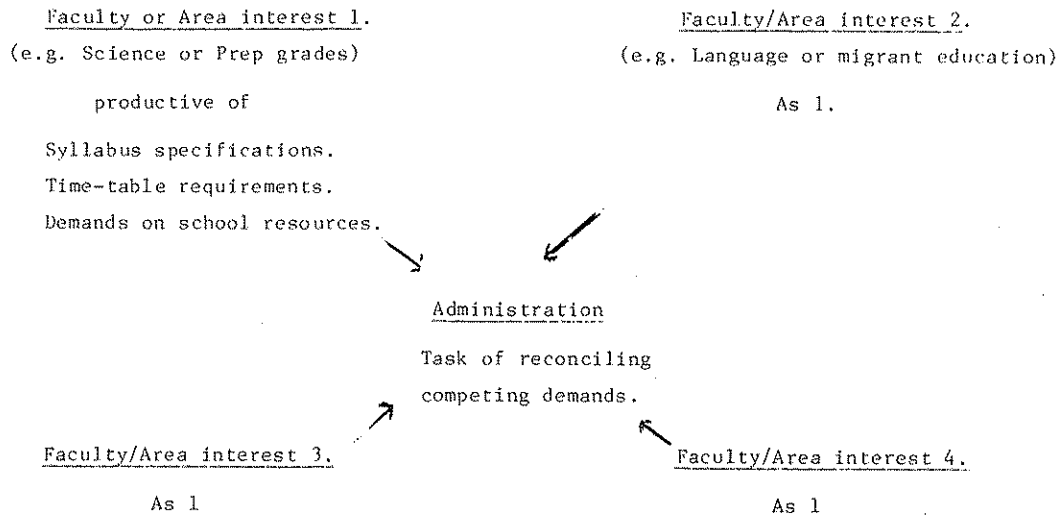
Our schools are under constant pressure at the present time, less as a consequence of additional new demands (although these are by no means entirely absent) than they are due to realignments of learning/teaching priorities and variations in the interpretations of school tasks and teacher roles. There are periods when hardly a day seems to pass without a prominent figure - politician, industrialist or educational leader - announcing that unless schools attend to the increasing significance of this or that socio-economic phenomenon they will lose effectiveness or credibility in their response to contemporary exigencies.

Few of these pronouncements are either trivial or groundless and therefore to be ignored without cost. Schools readily concede that fact. It is precisely this that presents the problem for the practising teacher. Even if he does have time to work through the theoretical implications and factual detail of these trends and imperatives the teacher has still to formulate or to adapt practical strategies for application to the classroom situation.

Yet schools cannot suspend operation in order to make themselves over in response to these pressures. They must, as it were, learn on the job even when the job itself is undergoing radical change.

Systemic appreciation of the dilemma is evidenced in the increase of in-service opportunities now offered to teachers. The Victoria Education Gazette and Teachers' Aid, Vol. 79, No. 17 of 21 August 1979 lists a comprehensive range of such courses offered by the Department and its associated agencies (pp.463-471). Colleges of Education and Advanced Education as well as University Schools and Departments of Education also offer a range of courses for the established professional. The complexities and uncertainties of the present day context of schooling are countered by our systems of education or so it seems. The teacher has access to a range of well-grounded resources and resource personnel. The school receives from the teacher the inputs thus acquired.

The project I discuss in this paper is no more than a small component of this counter balancing thrust. Nevertheless, it endeavours to deal with an aspect easily overlooked or mistakenly assumed to be adequately catered for. It is not at all simple to ensure a flow-on from the in-service machinery just described. Rather too much is often made of what can be done by single individuals. In complex organisations like schools (the large secondary school in particular), one frequently encounters disparate and conflicting sectional interests at work. One may schematize the situation I have in mind at its worst in the following way:



The system represented possesses multiple foci which are not necessarily related to each other. Origination in the form of teaching/learning programmes does not proceed from a central ground for interpretation by particular specialisms. It is therefore at best fortuitous if the system components address a central issue. At worst it becomes extremely unlikely that there is sufficient articulation of components and communication between sections for such an issue to be identified at all. Under these conditions the isolated individual finds it extremely difficult to influence the overall scheme of things. Input may thus be thwarted. The project to be discussed in what follows attempts to ameliorate this problem.

Development of the Project

Detailed accounts of the Task Force and Area Study Team Project of the School of Education of La Trobe University have been set out elsewhere (Claydon, 1974; Claydon (ed). 1975). In brief, the project owes something to the Educational Priority Area projects in the United Kingdom which were developed by Eric Midwinter and to the Ford Training and Placement Program devised at the University of Chicago by Professor Henrietta Schwartz. Both these projects centred themselves upon schools rather than tertiary institutions and involved teams of people rather than treating of the person undergoing a course of study as an isolated individual.

In somewhat the same way the Task Force/Area Study Team project has sought to provide advanced level in-service training employing the resources of a university school of education. The self-identified needs, goals or problems of particular schools or groups of schools are central to the project. Our intention has been to service these practical concerns with theoretical insights and skill facilitation over an extended period (of two years) within the schools concerned. The teachers within the schools are regarded as agents of programme creation, implementation and evaluation rather than passive recipients of ideas and material of a prefabricated nature. The school concerned is asked to formulate a set of objectives for the team of teachers to be formed in the school. This is their brief for action. Course construction from the repertoire available in the School of Education is then related to that brief.

Since the inception of the project teams have completed a two year period of formal operation in five high schools, one technical school and eleven primary schools. Teams are presently working in a technical school and three primary schools. It is expected that teams will be formed next year in one TAFE institution and a further primary school.

Rather more than a hundred teachers with between three and over twenty years experience have been involved in the project as team members, roughly equal numbers in secondary and in primary schools. Seven

principals (one of a secondary school and six of primary schools), and six primary school vice-principals have been involved. Since working in a team three teachers have subsequently become principals in other primary schools. One secondary division inspector requested secondment from that function to work as a team member.

The briefs provided for the teams by the schools over the years have ranged over a gamut of issues. Teams have sought to set up structures and devise procedures for schools with high saturations of children from non-English speaking backgrounds. Other teams have looked at the phenomenon of social disadvantage and its relation to level of academic achievement and to aspirations for the future. Further teams have trialled particular learning approaches under various conditions and for various age-levels; peer-group and cross-age tutoring programmes being among those approaches. Yet other teams have developed programmes of school-neighbourhood interaction, including strategies designed to make the transition from home to school both easier and more educative as an experience for child and parent alike. Other transfer areas concerning teams now working are those of primary to secondary school, from school to work and from unsuccessful school leaving to school re-entry. Some of these same themes have been identified with special reference to inner-city schools by the research and development project ICEP headed by Professor Turney of the University of Sydney (See Turney et al. 1978). Most themes are ones which have no obvious or exclusive connection with one subject or area of specialism but which nonetheless, have significance for the overall effectiveness of schooling.

At the end of their span of formal operation teams have generally followed a progress which begins with refinement and definition of the brief they are to fulfil, a review of the relevant research literature, a period of programme design, evaluation of a trial programme and then a more thorough going implementation and evaluation of the programme after any modifications indicated as desirable by the first trial have been made.

A major assignment task for each team has been the writing of a report of a standard which is worthy of publication under the aegis of the project by the School of Education of La Trobe. Some variations have eventuated. One or more Occasional Papers have been produced by a team and have been published in the same way. They isolate particular aspects of the team's work rather than the whole of its history. One team made its report in the form of a contribution to a book. Three annotated bibliographies on various themes have been produced by teams.

This incremental and team-oriented mode of information dissemination was thought to best suit a project essentially designed as an instrument of enablement. The more the teams both acted for themselves and originated their own accounts, the more this aspect should be served. As Turney et al. point out in "Inner-city Schools: Children, Teachers and Parents", the alternative mode of data presentation is the more conventional one of seeking to collate results from a broad range of instances in order to arrive at valid generalizations for schools at large. We agree with them that the two approaches are complementary, each being suitable to its own set of circumstances.

Modes of Team Formation

Teams have been formed in two ways.

1. Importation of staff

This was the manner in which teams were originally formed. Advertisements were placed in Departmental Publications and in newspapers. Teachers were invited to apply for secondment from their present positions to work as a team in the school concerned for a period of two years. Selection was by interview. The

interviewing panel typically comprised, the Principal of the school in which the team was to work, a representative from the Department of Education, and the project director from the University.

2. Internal recruitment.

The project began work in the secondary area. In 1975 the primary school area became involved. It proposed a modification of the project to permit a team of nine or more teachers to span across two or three neighbouring schools. It was also thought to be desirable to draw the team members from the existing staffs of the schools concerned. The typical pattern in the primary area has therefore been to work with a team of nine or more members drawn from three schools.

Criteria for assessing team effectiveness

Plainly an important consideration in this respect must be whether or not the team in question actually carried through the brief it was given and whether or not doing so resulted in learning gains or other desirable changes in the student population concerned. By and large this aspect has figured largely in the reports of the teams themselves.

For the purposes of this paper a closely related but somewhat different perspective has been employed. Successful team operation relates to the degree to which the brief for the team was translated into specific programmes which then became an enduring part of the school's programme and/or the extent to which the work of the team contributed to the spread of ideas and practices among schools.

Some Comments on Outcomes

Turney et.al. worked with four schools, of which one was a secondary school. In respect of the latter they remark that the response rate obtained for a data collecting survey was 43% as against 100%, 88% and 87% for the primary schools. This is described as being particularly disappointing since 'an inspection of staff records revealed that the respondents did not appear to differ in any significant... characteristics such as sex, age or length of service from the overall population of teachers at the school' (p.11).

We, in the Task Force/Area Study Team project have also found the secondary area to be a problem. It has proved much more difficult for teams to gain success in the terms outlined in the immediately preceding section. As was suggested earlier in this paper, the sectionalised structure of the typical high or technical school is, in our view, much to do with this, especially when associated with large school size, a factor examined in detail by Musgrave (1979, p.113). Success under these constraints has been a function of strong team cohesion allied with dynamic and supportive interaction with a principal possessing leadership qualities.

One other factor seems to be vital, namely the ability of the team concerned to form networks of association with the body of the staff. Without this occurrence internal group cohesion can be dysfunctional rather than facilitating. The team can be cut out of school functioning as being an unwelcome and illegitimate instrument of external control or influence, or as a mere instrument of coercion manipulated by the principal.

The importation mode of team formation accentuates the problems encountered unless it allows into the school personnel already known to both staff and principal and generally considered likely to 'fit in'. This is an unsurprising conclusion. Yet it is worth mentioning because there is still too little consideration of its implications given by those responsible for staffing policies in schools.

Originally the importation of the team was a response to a high turn-over situation in certain schools. (See English in Claydon (ed.) 1975). To secure a group of staff who would work together in the

school for a period of two years was a desirable prospect. In the event rather more than this was achieved given successful team operation. As many as two thirds of those seconded for the two years elected to remain in the school and to continue the work originated by the team during its span of formal operation. One example is the team which produced a multi-lingual, professionally printed, newspaper on educational affairs of direct importance to the neighbourhood. Supported by a grant from the Schools Commission it was the work of the one secondary school in the first instance. It is now a joint venture uniting a number of secondary and primary schools in the area. This occurred after the team had 'disbanded' and was brought about by team members who remained in the school.

There have been changes in staff mobility patterns of late. Work in less advantaged schools was accorded increasing recognition after the creation of the Schools Commission. Teachers tended to remain rather than to escape. In more recent times still, the schooling system has passed from an expansionist phase to one of contraction. This decreases teacher mobility. For these and other reasons we have tended to dispense with the practice of recruiting team members from beyond the schools concerned.

Within the project the teacher team works towards specific ends in the real situation of the actual school. This presents opportunities for researchers to trial learning/teaching strategies which they may be developing and which are relevant to the brief provided for the team. Examples of such developments are set out in the literature emanating from the project teams which is cited in a later section of this paper. They include the development of peer-group tutoring strategies in both secondary and technical schools and the employment of materials developed by Dr. Marta Rado for programmes of bilingual education. (See also, Claydon 1973; Claydon (ed.) 1975; Claydon, Knight & Rado, 1977).

Commitment to university courses by team members has been strong. Choice of courses is related less to individual preference or whim than to team necessity. The work of the team in the service of the school exerts direct influence upon what is studied. Relevance and application are thus assured and team members have happily accepted the constraint on choice. Courses in research design, techniques of measurement and evaluation and curriculum construction have been particularly well used by teams. As new areas of concern have emerged in the briefs accorded the teams by schools, courses in reading education, early childhood education and in home-school relations have also been study components. It has frequently been the case that the project directors can consult with those of their colleagues running the courses concerned to arrange assignment work directly contributory to the work of a team. The university course may deal with sampling techniques; the team may need to employ precisely those techniques in a survey of parent attitudes. (See Claydon (ed.) 1975).

Particularly in respect of Area Study Teams there has been active promotion of transfer of ideas across schools. This can be seen from the following.

Primary Area Team One	Schools A.B.C.	Developed peer-group tutoring programmes.
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Primary Area Team Two. (formed a year later)	Schools D.E.F.	School D: School-home interaction programmes.* School E: Language through experience programmes using parent assistance. School F: Peer-group tutoring programmes.
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Primary Area Study Three. (formed two years after formation of AST 2)	Schools D.E.F. (Same schools as AST2 with different team members).+	School D: Transfer from primary to secondary school. School E: Integrated curriculum design. School F: School-home integration programmes.
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School G.	Principal a former member of AST 1	Peer-group tutoring. ++School-home interaction programmes.
School H.	Principal a former member of AST 2	Language experience programmes.

* Peer-group tutoring introduced by former team member of AST1 transferred from staff of School A.

+ AST 2 contained the Principal of School D. AST 3 includes the Principals of Schools E and F as members.

++ Area Study Team One did not develop links with the parent body and the school neighbourhood. It recognised the lack in its report. Area Study Team Two 'launched' its report by staging a conference cum wine and cheese evening in one of the member schools, to which event they invited, among many others (including the district inspector and parents of the three schools concerned), the members of Area Study Team One. The work of the second team had made much of precisely the area 'neglected' by its predecessor. By the time this event was held it was also the case that school-community links had become a well publicised concern of the Department of Education.

The testimony of many team members indicates that their experience in the project contributed significantly to their feelings of competence and confidence. They also confirmed a need for such strengthening. In its absence the urgings of external authority towards new directions of work understandably excite covert opposition. The demands create threats to security. These attitudes are singularly intransigent simply because they are informed by a fear that to declare a need for new information or a skill reorientation may be to confess to a blameworthy shortcoming.

Under the conditions pertaining within the project this illusion of threat was dispelled. Teams gained a balanced tolerance of the fear of failure as they developed insights into the complex conditions governing total success and gained the knowledge and skills which corporately equipped them to work towards it. In other words they became progressively clear about the distinction between personal insufficiency and the difficulties which haunt the teaching task per se which were mentioned in the introduction to this paper.

As has also been mentioned earlier the various teams formed under the aegis of the project have included in their membership numbers of principals, vice-principals and principals to be. Subsequent discussion with these has yielded the information that, as a consequence of team membership, they gained considerably in their understanding of their roles and what is involved in its effective exercise. Typical

of such testimony is that of one principal who said that the brief he was importantly instrumental in forming for the team in his school was substantially to do with what he would have sought to do in the school, team or no team. However, his work to this end as a member of a team achieved two things. In the first case his course of study at the university greatly increased his understanding as to why it was desirable to do what the brief outlined and of the techniques essential to accomplishing these objectives. In the second case he shared the effort of acquiring those understandings with a number of his staff on a basis of co-operative equality. This greatly increased staff subscription to the developments brought about in the schools to fulfil the brief.

A report of publishable standard is expected from each team. Such reports call for data analysis and programme evaluation. They further reinforce the relevance of courses of study prescribed for the teams. That the reports serve important purposes is demonstrated by several facts. They have been referred to in various subsequent publications not connected with the project. Notable among these have been School Commission publications and the publications of the Sydney based ICEP project mentioned earlier. This is independent confirmation that the reports can stand public scrutiny.

The project directors regularly receive orders for reports which have now exhausted their print runs. As a result we have cautiously increased the number of copies of later reports. All of this appears to indicate that the project plays a part in the dissemination of information on the one hand and reduces the division between theory and practice on the other.

Participation in the writing of a report at the conclusion of a team's span of formal operation appears to sharpen the participants overall assessment of the issues and the accomplishments involved in the work done by the team. Certainly the performance of team members who have later consented to present papers or give talks to students in initial training bears this out. Other past team members have made equally valuable contributions to classes of students at B.Ed. level.

Perhaps the final comment and the ultimate test of the project's worth should be to do with its very continuance. This is dependent upon approaches to not from its point of origin. Unless the project directors receive requests to form a team from schools then they do not seek to do so. Once such a request is received then one or more of the project directors will visit the school and describe the workings of the project to the principal and the staff. After this it is then left open to the school(s) concerned to renew the invitation after a discussion of the visit. Should this eventuate then active steps are taken towards assessing the possible membership of the team and the nature of the brief which will be given to it.

Invariably the directors urge any schools inquiring about the project to consult schools which have had teams in them in the past. We also draw their attention to team reports and other publications.

Not all initial invitations are pursued further. On the other hand there has not yet been a year when teams were not formed.

Literature of the project. Task Force Reports and Occasional Papers concern secondary schools. Area Study Team Reports concern work in primary schools. No Area Study Team Occasional Papers have been produced to date. TASK FORCE REPORTS. Published by School of Education, La Trobe University.

- No. 1. An Annotated Bibliography on Home/School Relations with Special Reference to Compensatory Education.
- No. 2. Open Schooling: Parents in Limbo.
- No. 3. Inequality in Education: Aspects of the Theoretical Debate in the Literature as Perceived by a Team of Teachers in Melbourne's Western Suburbs.
- No. 4. Change in the Making.

AREA STUDY TEAM REPORTS.

- No. 1. Primary School Innovation: A Case Study of Three Melbourne Schools.*
- No. 2. Primary School as a Learning Community. *

TASK FORCE OCCASIONAL PAPERS.

- No. 1. BGHS: A Report upon a School Explosion.
- No. 2. The Creation of a Creche in a High School.
- No. 3. Cross-age Tutoring: A Means of Increasing Motivation.
- No. 4. A Case Study of the Cross-Age Tutoring Program.*
- No. 5. A Careers Re-entry Program. *

Two further Area Study Team Reports are now in preparation.

* Still available.

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