INTRODUCTION

In Australia, the USA and elsewhere, people have made similar analyses of what is wrong with schools. Declining educational standards, poor articulation of school curriculum with the needs of the workforce, inappropriate teaching methods, outdated teachers' content knowledge and outmoded school structures have all been cited as reasons for a fundamental rethink of the structure and purposes of schooling. Much of this is not new. Public official's eagerness to reform schools has continued unabated in this century, especially in the last three decades. A history of trial and failure has sent reformers sifting through the lessons of the past to find the keys not just to improve schools but to create environments in which these improvements can be sustained.

One way that past reforms can be conceptualised is in terms of centralised and decentralised initiatives. Cuban (1990) describes the cyclic nature of these reforms as they operated in the USA. The reform movements of the sixties produced the drive for participation and equity in schools and the push to decentralise authority to govern schools. By the late 1970s, centralising authority gained support from state policymakers who pursued school improvement through legislation. Measures such as standardised testing, teacher certification and career ladders and were introduced as levers for change. Within a few years it was recognised that state bureaucracies were incapable of improving local schools. 'Third wave' reforms set out to restructure the school system by moving power back to the school which was now recognised as the unit of change. This decentralised reform effort was pursued through strategies such as school-site management and fostered by programs such as Ted Sizer's Coalition for Essential Schools.

Australia, with a distinctly more centralist history of educational governance, has experienced a different balance to
the school reform agenda. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, the various state education authorities were preoccupied with reorganising the structure, content and delivery of the curriculum. Considerable resources to support curriculum implementation were distributed through the state education departments. These centralised state initiatives were offset by the largely decentralising effect of the participation and equity programs funded by the federal government in the seventies (e.g. the Priority Schools Program, the Participation and Equity Program and the Innovations Grant Program). This pattern was changed in the mid 1980s when the various state authorities began to dismantle central bureaucracies, devolving power and responsibility from head offices to schools.

History tells us that neither top-down nor bottom-up approaches to school reform work on their own (Fullan, 1992). Central initiatives do not work because they attempt to standardise curriculum and performance in a way that is ineffective except for the narrowest goals. They simply fail to respond to the cultural complexity of schools. Bottom-up reforms are problematic because individual schools lack the capacity to manage the change and because the changes cannot be tracked and sustained. Site-based management has been criticised because of its failure to bring across the board improvement to the core function of schools, teaching and learning. Cultural reforms, such as those achieved by the Coalition of Essential Schools, while meaningful and effective at the local level are typically confined to small groups of teachers and schools. They are less than persistent and the findings from these efforts have not been transferable to other schools. In Australia, the school-based curriculum development movement and the various equity programs produced useful innovations which managed to mobilise communities and produce interesting local effects. However, the idiosyncratic nature of the innovations and the broad parameters for what counted as success meant that there was little transference of ideas from one school to the next. In short, it would seem that neither centralised nor decentralised approaches to school reform are producing the broad 'national' effects demanded by the wider educational community.

Rather than comparing the strengths and inevitable weaknesses of centralised vs decentralised efforts, it occurs to us that a different kind of analysis of these reforms is required; one that focuses instead on the blurred boundaries that occur when top-down and bottom-up efforts run together. Why do some structural reforms induce cultural change in schools when others fail in the face of cultural resistance? How is it that the same reform project takes off in one school and not in another? What
patterns emerge when we examine a variety of reforms in a variety of schools? This paper attempts such an analysis by examining the progress of four recent school reform projects in five Western Australian schools. One of these projects, the National Schools Project (NSP), has been selected as a central case, because it represents a particular kind of approach to the issue of the structural/cultural balance in school reform.

CHAPTER ONE: THE NATIONAL SCHOOLS PROJECT

The National Schools Project (NSP) is part of a broader national initiative to improve the quality of teaching and learning in Australian schools, jointly sponsored by the Commonwealth government, each of the state governments and the Australian Teachers Union. In Western Australia, the project commenced in late 1991 and is jointly managed by the Ministry of Education and the State School Teachers Union. The project set out to test 'the efficacy of giving schools the authority to manipulate their work organisation arrangements outside the current boundaries and within the framework of the systems work unit' (Angus, 1992, p.2). By using rule 'waivers', the project offers schools a mechanism to trial new types of work organisation currently prohibited by awards, regulations, and union and employer policies. Schools were invited to develop proposals for changes to work organisation to put before state steering groups for approval. Once these proposals are successfully trialed, it is hoped that they could form the basis for reforming the structural and regulatory framework for the school system. In 1992, the project commenced with 50 schools which expanded to 300 schools for 1993.

Messages about the success of the NSP to date are mixed (Chadbourne, 1992a; Connors, 1993; Wallace & Wildy, 1993). Most schools have been slow to take up the challenge presented by the project. Some schools seem unable or incapable of addressing fundamental work organisational issues. Others have focussed instead on cultural and curriculum changes. Few have advanced proposals to test the state regulatory framework. Overall progress seems to fall well short of the NSP's hope that school's structural experimentation would guide the reform of the bureaucratic framework for a larger number of schools. Two NSP schools which have been the subject of more detailed examination are reported here:

Case 1: BSHS

BSHS was one of seven Western Australian schools participating in the first year of the National Schools Project. A metropolitan
senior high school, BSHS has approximately 940 students, 70 teaching staff, and 14 ancillary and support staff.

The school agreed to join the NSP in the latter part of 1991. Reporting on the school’s involvement in the project, Chadbourne (1992a) describes some of the internal difficulties experienced by the school. The decision to join the project was hurried and not unanimous. For the first term of 1992, the school’s internal politics racked the project committee with many staff feeling left out of the process and frustrated at the lack of progress. From the outset, the project had to compete with many other priorities including school development planning, student discipline, school/industry links and monitoring student standards. Even six months into the project these ongoing priorities and seasonal activities such as the school ball and examinations meant that the NSP was quite lowly ranked on the ‘league ladder’ of school activities.

Nine months into the project at BSHS, the major achievements are unclear. Most of the project-related activities described by Chadbourne (1992) such as an increased interest by some staff in more student centred teaching approaches, a more participative decision making policy and better links with local industry were already running prior to the NSP. The school’s only proposal to the state steering group for the school to retain its temporary teachers was rejected because of poor supporting rationale. The project committee were working on an initiative to introduce an alternative Year structure based on teams of teachers but this was still down the track. Chadbourne (1992) concludes that many arguments still need to be won, industrial issues negotiated and professional interests accommodated before the project flourishes at BSHS.

Case 2: WHS

WHS was another of the seven schools to accept an invitation to join the pilot group of schools in Western Australia. This country school with approximately 160 students had 16 teachers and 4 ancillary staff. While the school was structured in a traditional fashion, school decision making was reasonably collaborative prior its entry to the NSP in late 1991. The school was already engaged in the school development planning process.

The same kinds of NSP reforms – changes to work organisation and rule waivers – were being tested at both WHS and BSHS. At WHS the project did receive a high level of support from staff from the outset. Project decisions were dealt with in a highly collaborative manner and the project soon became an umbrella for much school activity. However, like BSHS, the WHS staff directed
the focus of the project onto curriculum and school development
issues rather than the more fundamental structural issues. The
school adopted as a goal the development of student skills in
independent learning and invested considerable energy
experimenting with student centred learning strategies. The
school formed a student consultative committee and made plans to
institute a cross-curricular approach to the teaching of Art and
Technology for Year 8 in the following year.

The state NSP project team, anxious to make progress on its work
restructuring agenda, pressed the school to generate proposals
for rule waivers. The school resisted the pressure to submit
proposals for rule waivers. When the school did submit proposals
to the state steering group – four were submitted during the year
– none were approved. However, as Wallace and Wildy (1993) note
in their review of the project, this failure to obtain approval
for the proposals was not viewed too seriously by the school. As
a small school with few structural rigidities, WHS found that it
was able to proceed with most of its early plans without the need
for central rule changes.

It was only into the second year of the project that WHS
discovered any real system barriers to its work. Two issues were
of particular concern. The first involved a desire on the part
of the staff to have more say over staff transfers to the school.
In some cases, new staff moving into the school had some
difficulty adjusting to the project philosophy. The second issue
was related to the school's move to change its student reporting
system in Year 8 to a system of student profiles. While the
system had given some 'encouragement' for this initiative - and
indeed was planning for state-wide implementation in the longer
term - the school was concerned that it was too far in front of
the system and that this might cause concern among the local
community. The school sought reassurance that they had the full
backing of the Ministry. In the words of the principal:

We have been encouraged by the Ministry and the NSP to move ahead
on student profiles and now the Ministry won't come out and say
that this is the way to go.

Wallace and Wildy (1993) conclude that there is little doubt that
the school's membership of the NSP provided a focus for school-
based learning, discussion and activity about teaching and
learning which might not otherwise have taken place. It is not
so clear whether the school's restructuring activity was of the
kind and magnitude originally envisaged by the NSP. Neither is
it clear whether the NSP is capable of responding to the school's
particular concerns about external structural barriers.
The cases of BSHS and WHS and the National Schools Project provide us with one chapter of the centralised/decentralised reform story. Early reading of these two cases might have us jump to some early conclusions about the factors affecting the success of innovations in schools - size of school, for example. A closer reading would indicate that the project did not neatly fit into the success/failure categories. Indeed, there were aspects of the project which found a ready hearing at both schools - more collaborative forms of decision making, for example. There were also disappointments - such as the early failure of the schools to generate work organisation proposals. This leads us to suspect that the whole story is more complex than first imagined. The following three cases of schools involved in different kinds of projects might help us understand more about the process of school reform.

Case 3: NDSH and the Managing Change Project

In many respects the Managing Change in Schools Project was the parent of the NSP. This project, conducted by the Western Australian Ministry of Education in 1988-89, was designed to remove obstacles to devolution and decentralisation. A key element in the project was an undertaking by the Ministry to waive regulations, where possible, so that the schools would feel empowered to exercise self-determination. As with the NSP, schools were encouraged by the Ministry to undertake reviews of their institutions and to question the basic functions and structures of schools. Schools were told not to feel limited by existing rules because, where possible, regulations would be waived to allow experimentation to proceed. Central office stressed, however, that all proposals had to be within acceptable workload limits for school staff and could not involve ongoing additional funding.

One of the seven schools engaged in this project was NDHS, a small district high school in a progressive country town. The school community began its involvement by spending a lot of time reaching agreement that its goal would be "contribute to make an independent, responsible, confident adult learner" (Chadbourne, 1991, p.30). As a next step, the school looked at ways in which its own structure could be reshaped to best achieve the agreed objective. One proposal from the staff centred on the idea of organising into four teams, each with an elected leader. It was felt that smaller teams had the advantage of being able to respond more readily to the needs of students. For the next two
years, the school worked within this restructured model with some success. Teachers reported that they felt empowered by the team approach and that their contribution to the decision making and learning processes made a difference to student outcomes (Chadbourne, 1991).

To facilitate the school's restructuring, NDHS sent a request to the Ministry to replace the deputy principal position with a number of limited tenure leadership positions. The Teachers Union, who also received a copy of the school's request, were concerned with the industrial implications of the proposal and wrote to the Ministry with the advice that this was 'a further example of the need to rein-in the [Managing Change] project so that ... schools participating in the project do not have their expectations dashed or the Ministry left with egg on its face" (Chadbourne, 1991, p.33). The issue was held over for some months until the incumbent deputy principal at NDHS applied for a promotion to another school. This time, when the school tried to force the issue, the principal was advised by the Ministry that it was unable to endorse the proposal, citing a list of industrial and human resource difficulties.

Without central support for school changes, the initiatives at NDHS faltered soon afterwards. The frustrations with the system response to the school's request for support were evident in the following comments by school personnel:

There were times when the school felt totally on its own as it tried to challenge existing practices. It seemed that the unions did not want to change and that some of the personnel in at central office wanted to maintain the status quo. The message was sent to 'challenge the system' yet the message being enacted was 'don't bother to challenge the system, it's too hard and if you do you are on your own'. (Chadbourne, 1992b, p.61)

Case 4: KJPS and the Ashenden Plan

The fourth case concerns one school's reactions to some more specific proposals by Dean Ashenden (1990) to restructure teachers' work. The study was conducted by Chadbourne and Robertson (1992) in KJPS, a metropolitan junior primary with 150 students organised into six classes. A principal, seven teachers, two teachers aides and a clerical assistant make up the staff of the school.

Ashenden (1990) suggests that teachers are currently caught up in
an apparently seamless web of low productivity and unhappiness. He proposes a restructuring of the staff mix to employ a greater number of support staff and fewer teachers. While there are a number of other features to Ashenden's plan, his central idea is to change the division of labour in schools to free teachers from some of the more unskilled tasks so that they can concentrate on the narrower task of teaching. Doing this would enable students to learn more creatively and teachers to find satisfaction in their work.

What Chadbourne and Robertson (1992) found in this junior primary setting was that while the staff endorsed Ashenden's proposal for a different division of labour they did not want to abandon the classroom 'cottage'. Teachers placed a higher value on peripheral tasks such as lunch duty, pastoral care and community liaison than was expected. They saw this kind of work as being an integral part of the job of teaching, particularly of young children. They also saw that the broader interpretation of the role provided teachers with a lot of autonomy and flexibility, enabling them to be responsive to the changing moods and interests of children. There was also little appetite for spending extra time supervising the work of ancillary staff when it was often more efficient and effective to do the work themselves. Chadbourne and Robertson (1992) suggest that:

In the final analysis [teachers] were arguing for the status quo - albeit a better researched status quo... These reasons represent a case for retaining tasks that are not really teaching, for retaining the division of labour established over the past 100 years, and for retaining a broad, generalist, caring role for students. (p.20)

Case 5: MPS and First Steps

MPS serves a community that is among the most disadvantaged in the Perth metropolitan area. Since 1989, the school has passed through a vigorous cycle of renewal. One of the teachers who taught in the school before 1989 remembers it as an 'angry, nasty, negative place'. By the end of 1990 the school was 'almost unrecognisable'. Four years later, she says, 'There is a general feeling of trust. Kids trust the staff now. They are comfortable and happy.' Always a difficult, disadvantaged school, it now has a language development program which is a show-piece for the whole school system. This transformation has resulted from a subtle alchemy of staff changes, leadership and professional development.

A key ingredient in the school's transformation has been the changes in staff. A new principal was appointed from the beginning of 1989, and a further fourteen of the school's
seventeen staff were appointed the next year. The school's long history of staff transience was suddenly halted in 1990 by a change in the systemic permanency arrangements. Many of the new teachers who arrived in 1990 were long serving and skilled temporary teachers seeking permanent appointments in the school system. These staff changes were crucial in transforming the school., but so was his new broom of leadership provided by the leadership and his administrative team. As one teacher put it:

They are a great team. They work together very well. I guess that is because they are so supportive of one another. They set the tone for the whole school... If you have a problem they're the first people to come and help you.

Although the administration has paid a great deal of attention to the school's discipline system, the principal has struggled to move teachers beyond the issue which once dominated the school:

I wanted to make sure all our energies were not just devoted to surviving or dealing with the discipline issues, that we address the great need that I noticed, and that is the children's academic performance.

Since 1989, the academic and discipline issues have been addressed in the school through a combination of three collaborative professional development programs: an assertive behaviour management program; a student self-esteem program; and a language development program. Staff at the school share the vision of improving student outcomes as the central goal of the school renewal activities. As one of the teachers said, without the improvement of in school language through the First Steps program, 'where would the education part come from?':

We had a self esteem program going, a discipline program going, but where would be the education? Once you see the kids behave themselves and the like themselves, what are you going to do then?

What First Steps provided the school was a set of explicit curriculum support materials, eight days of professional development for each teacher, and a term of team-teaching support from experienced collaborative teachers. Through their involvement in the First Steps program, the teachers at MPS had time to reflect on their practices, to deepen and extend their diagnostic skills, and to develop the collaborative teaching arrangements which have come to characterise the school. In 1992, three years after most of the teachers participated in the First Steps professional development activities, First Steps
teaching strategies are still part of the daily professional dialogue in the school.

STRUCTURE AND CULTURE: A DIFFERENT ANALYSIS

Earlier, we warned against jumping to quick conclusions about the factors involved in successful implementation of reform. The five preceding cases illustrate that the interaction of external reforms with the structures and cultures of schools is not straightforward. Why, for example, did the ideas of the NSP find little widespread support at BSHS when, clearly, this kind of school with its organisational and curriculum rigidity is ripe for reform? Perhaps existing structures, such as subject departments and the regimented upper school curriculum served as cultural conditioners so that staff had difficulty imagining doing things which would challenge the status quo. The realities of teacher survival in the classrooms of a large secondary school are perhaps too far removed from esoteric ideas about work organisation to have much meaning. While the NSP was targeting system-level barriers, perhaps the real issue in this case was school-level inertia caused by internal structural conditioning.

For a number of reasons, WHS was structurally much simpler than BSHS. As a small high school, it had just two heads of department who already had cross-curricular responsibilities. And because its students were younger, it could operate without the syllabus constraints imposed by the external Tertiary Entrance Examination. Culturally, too, the school seemed ready for change. Strong connections to the community, democratic leadership and a focus on students meant that the school was already committed to some of the underlying principles of the NSP. However, by the measures of the NSP, the school was not very innovative when it came to proposing alternative structures. The school decided to focus initial efforts on reforms to pedagogy, relationships between staff and students and decision making processes - initiatives which did not require any major structural changes. It was only after these initiatives had been proceeding for some months that a number of structural issues began to emerge. The NSP agenda for change, it would seem, was incongruent with the school’s agenda.

What happened at NDHS? A small school in a progressive community, culturally, it was probably ready to challenge some of the traditional assumptions about school organisation. With sound leadership, initial encouragement from the Ministry and few internal structural impediments it moved quickly to implement a devolved, self-managing team structure. However, the Ministry and the Union seemed incapable of moving beyond their own
industrial and ideological rigidities to support the school in its work. In the case of NDHS, the school it would seem had made the cultural shift - imagined the new world - but the system was too slow to respond.

At KJPS, we have an example of an external idea for change being visited on a school with a strong 'cottage' tradition of teaching. Ashenden was proposing a fundamental shift in working conditions where teachers give over some of their tasks to focus on teaching. These junior primary teachers with a history of deep concern for and involvement with children's learning and overall welfare saw little reason to change their ways. And, by the standards set for reform, there appear to be few good reasons to proceed. Of all schools, junior primary schools are likely places to find strong norms of collegiality and experimentation where teachers work closely together to learn from each other and where there is a clear focus on student learning. They are certainly not places of low productivity and unhappiness. This proposal, though well intentioned, simply did not stand the test of need in this setting.

MPS satisfied many of the cultural preconditions for change before the Ministry's First Steps program arrived in the school. These conditions included open supportive leadership, a history of successful collaborative projects and a clear focus on student outcomes. Structurally, too, the school was in good shape. A recent system-wide change to teacher permanency arrangements had meant that the school was able to retain staff who might otherwise have been shifted. Clever internal rearrangement of teacher relief time freed staff to meet for joint planning sessions. So First Steps with its focus on improving student progress and its use of collaborating teachers was welcomed by the school as a timely and beneficial adjunct to its program of school renewal. It was practical and it filled a perceived need to improve student outcomes.

BOUNDARY THEMES

So what can be learned from these cases about centrally-inspired reforms and their impact in schools. We have already said that things aren't as obvious as they might first appear. Before proceeding we would want to make two points about school reform.

First, we believe that the centralisation/decentralisation distinction to be unhelpful. The characteristics of particular reforms do not operate independently from the characteristics of individual schools. Effective approaches to school reform would seem to call for combining factors which do not apparently go together - simultaneous bottom-up-top downness. Second, the
sheer complexity of the change process precludes a simple listing of key factors associated with success. An alternative method - one that we have adopted here - is to approach the topic through a discussion of some of the 'boundary' themes.

The first message from these studies is about the importance of school culture. It is, in Fullan's (1992, p.111) words "complex and powerfully resistant to influence". Reforms, no matter how well conceptualised, are likely to fail in the face of a culture of resistance. Equally, it is important to recognise that overcoming cultural resistance takes time, preceding by many months (or years) any tangible structural shifts. Reflecting on schools' uptake of the NSP ideas, Angus (1993) says that no-one in the project realised how long it would take schools to make decisions about the kinds of changes they wished to pursue. Without exception, the cultural readiness of the schools in this study was a critical ingredient in the progress of the proposed changes.

The second observation is that structural complexity often serves to stifle change. The bureaucratic structure of organisations cultivates in people a bureaucratic mindset. People tend to work in isolation. There is little incentive to share ideas or explore ways of doing things differently. The distance between innovative ideas and the classroom is too great to produce significant effects. Moreover, the structures of these schools are themselves resistant to change. So, projects like the NSP which challenge teachers to generate alternative structures, tend to produce surface interest but the core structures remain firmly in place. Schools like NDHS and MPS which were able to make some internal structural adjustments - to decision making structures, teaching teams, joint planning arrangements - were those which were already structurally quite open. Preexisting structural openness meant that schools could institute changes - in the first instance - without having to seek special sanction from the state authorities.

Teachers don't always see the need for change. The prospects for change are greater when those expected to carry out the change agree on its need and appropriateness, and on the priority of the change relative to other local concerns. While this might seem to be an obvious notion, it is not all that straightforward. First, schools are faced with overloaded improvement agendas. Therefore, it is not only a question of whether a given need is important, but also how important it is relative to other needs. Often - as was the case with BSHS - the new project gets relegated to the 'second division' because of more pressing concerns. Second, precise needs are often not clear at the beginning especially with complex changes. As the WHS and NDHS experiences demonstrate, people often become clearer about their
needs only when they start doing things.

Changes in schools must also pass the test of the 'practicality ethic' of teachers. The schools which made the most progress were those which quickly turned their attention to matters of curriculum. First Steps literacy strategies and student centred learning approaches were adopted because they were practical changes which addressed salient needs and fitted well with teachers' situations. They represented explicit alternatives to current curriculum.

Ambitious projects, such as those described in this paper, are nearly always politically driven. Invariably the timeline between initiation decision, start up in schools and anticipated results is too short. However, these cases have shown that solid change requires deep meaning which must be born over time. With complex reforms, it is often necessary to work through ambivalence before it becomes clear that the change is workable and right. Sometimes - as in the case of KJPS - it emerges that the change is unworkable and wrong.

FINAL CHAPTER: THE NATIONAL SCHOOLS PROJECT

For the final chapter of this analysis we return to the case of the NSP where schools are encouraged to undertake their own work organisational reforms within a central framework. A number of observations are worth making about this kind of top-down/bottom up approach to school reform. First, it is clear that the structures of some schools - particularly larger schools - are in need of redesign. But, the structures of many other schools are already sufficiently open to allow for all manner of improvements. The paradox is that existing structural characteristics of schools affect teachers' capacity to imagine a new world. Schools that need to change can't change and schools that don't need to change can change. But this has always been the case. What the NSP does which is different from other reforms is to recognise school structure as a fundamental issue in school reform. By constantly bringing schools' people back to that issue the NSP holds some chance of helping schools break out of the structural paradox.

The second issue concerns the NSP's assumption that the school is the unit of reform (what Michael Fullan (1992) regards as one of the most misunderstood concepts in school reform). From the evidence presented in this paper, it would appear that this notion works well in those schools which exhibit cultural readiness and structural openness. However, we also know that larger bureaucratic school organisations present a particular
challenge. It is here that the notion of the school as the unit of change falls down. It could be that the unit is something smaller - the year group or the subject department. Or alternatively the school could be seen as the centre rather than the unit of change. This view recognises that the day to day action takes place in schools but argues that sustained improvement requires serious and radical restructuring and a different role for central authorities than that adopted by the NSP.

The final issue concerns the starting point for change in schools. While the NSP focus was clearly on work organisation, most schools chose curriculum as the place to begin. It was only after some months of activity that schools began, albeit tentatively, to tinker with school structures. The regulatory framework was tested only when schools encountered problems with their school-level structural arrangements. At WHS, for example, this phase was not reached until eighteen months into the project. Schools, in other words, had a different sense of the order of progress of reform than the NSP. The danger is that impatience about the progress of schools on the work organisational agenda may lead to premature judgments by the NSP and withdrawal of support before schools have had a chance to understand the issues.

The NSP has adopted a process in which there a role for central authorities and a role for local school communities. Success requires for merging of those roles in a complex and ambiguous way. It means an understanding on the part of bureaucrats that progress needs to be measured from the cultural perspective of the school rather than from the technical timelines of the project. Equally, it requires an understanding from teachers of the need to see and experience the world beyond the egg crate of their own classroom.

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Fremantle, November 1993