Linking national intentions, state curriculum policy and school practice.

Over the past year and a half, the Queensland/Victorian Health and Physical Education Consortium has been working on a National Professional Development Program, implementing the Health and Physical Education Statement and Profile for Australian Schools in schools in both states.

The project has been a voluntary one for schools, and the interest and commitment from teachers to a time consuming and at times quite challenging process of curriculum development and change has been both rewarding and surprising.

Rewarding, because the schools chose to continue after the first phase in 1994, and have continued with enthusiasm their process of school based curriculum and professional development in a climate of uncertainty. Surprising because the vast changes that have occurred in both states in policy, curriculum and school management over the past decade have placed enormous pressures on schools and teachers. Schools have had to translate into practice the plethora of policy changes introduced at the systems level. Surprising because teachers have enthusiastically embraced yet another initiative, albeit mandatory in Victoria, however, not a priority area in Queensland.

Decisions about education policy have always been influenced by the government of the day, and in some cases by the requirement of tertiary institutions. However more and more of the changes in policy direction are influenced by forces 'outside' education, from business and industry, parents groups and unions. These decisions place more and more demands on the day to day practice of teachers in schools. The trial and implementation of the national statements and profiles have placed even more stress on schools.

The idea of national 'collaboration in curriculum had been proposed by the Directors-General of Education prior to 1987, however from the time of the 1988 meeting of the AEC in Darwin, the Education Ministers had assumed more control over national collaborative initiatives, highlighting the existing tensions between the Commonwealth's role in policy formation and the states responsibility for schooling. (Lingard, 1995).

At the Hobart meeting in 1989, the AEC endorsed the historic "common and agreed national goals for schooling in Australia", and agreed to promote greater levels of cooperation in curriculum development to increase efficiency and effectiveness through the sharing of knowledge and scarce curriculum development resources across systems, and to
remove unnecessary differences in curriculum between systems. The use of the term, National, in the context of the development of the statements and profiles infers collaboration, a degree of consensus and commitment on behalf of the stakeholders. There was a recognition in the national collaborative process that the Commonwealth's agenda was to use the profiles, the 'reporting framework' of outcomes, as the basis for national reporting on the achievement of students across the country. This emphasis has been rejected by the states, and the issue of reporting or of testing students to indicate levels of achievement or to pinpoint areas to be targeted or resourced has been firmly retained at the state level.

At the meeting in Perth in July 1993, the AEC referred the national statements and profiles and the key competencies back to the states and territories for further review involving consultation with their own educational communities, so that each state and territory could determine if the initiatives should be proceeded with.

Despite the outcomes of the 1993 meeting, all states and territories have now accepted the need for at least a degree of national collaboration across the sectors of education. (Lingard, 1995). (The position of NSW has changed as a result of the change of government in that state). The non-endorsement of the national statements and profiles was based on party political lines and was a clear message to the commonwealth by the states that they intended to keep control of curriculum development within the states.

The "uptake" of the documents has now, two years later, become an exercise in translating, with varying degrees of fidelity to the original intent of the documents, the national documents into more idiosyncratic state documents. The Curriculum Corporation was requested by MCEETYA to report on the status of the process in early April 1994, and an updated report was published in May 1995. This report indicates that states are continuing to use statements and profiles as a basis for curriculum development while incorporating variations which reflect local policies and priorities. (McLean, Wilson 1995).

One interesting outcome of the "collaborative" process has been the funding from the Commonwealth through the Department of Employment, Education and Training in the form of the National Professional Development Program which directly allocates funds to implement the statements and profiles in schools to professional associations, educational consortia, and through its General Element, to state prioritised initiatives. This move has probably been the major factor in states' decisions to consider and use the national documents.

In some states this has resulted in the state priorities being funded through the General Element eg in Queensland, major funding was given
to the priority areas of mathematics and English. The non-priority areas received funding through the Strategic element, either through the initiatives of professional associations or curriculum area specialists within the systems and tertiary institutions. It is as part of the NPDP Strategic Element, that the Queensland/Victorian Health and Physical Education consortium received funding.

Research into curriculum change has clearly indicated that "top down models", imposed without adequate and appropriate consultation with teachers, administrators, students and parents, is most likely to be unsuccessful. As Cummings observed towards the end of the national curriculum development process, "There is little doubt that the nature, extent and speed with which many of these development have been initiated has overwhelmed many participant observers. Some groups; teachers, parents and students, have been excluded from the process."(Cumming, 1992)

The perception by teachers is that they have been further excluded from the development of the state documents. As one teacher on the project has stated, "Policy positions such as the CSF are always imposed, and the educational rationale, if there is one, is rarely made clear." (Project Teacher, 1995)

The process of implementation is vastly different in Victoria and Queensland, and the experience provides an interesting comparison between the practice in schools working under what are considered to be, ideologically opposed state governments. As Hargreaves states,

"ideological compliance and financial self reliance have therefore become the twin realities of change for many of today's schools and their teachers". (Hargreaves, 1994).

State systems have formulated or are formulating central curriculum policy, (mandated curriculum in Victoria and the Shaping the Future recommendations in Queensland), and funding priorities at the state level have forced schools to be financially self reliant in addressing curriculum issues in other than the priority areas which are usually mathematics and English. There is no doubt that the opportunity for schools to access funds through the NPDP project influenced their choice to join and to continue on the project.

The emphasis on school based management not only devolves many of the administrative, budgetary, resource and personnel decisions previously organised at regional or central level, it also requires schools to be responsive to parental and community pressures to address social issues such as behaviour management, discipline, dealing with drug incidences in schools, harassment and bullying, protective behaviours, along with community demands for accountability in terms of basic skills of literacy and numeracy.
All these changes are occurring alongside policy imperatives resulting from changes of government in both states. In Queensland the emphasis has been on social justice, equity, values and ethics, and the policy of professional development driven by community concern for "teachers in front of classrooms, which has as part of the self managing school, placed the responsibility for professional development on the school itself. It is only since the recommendations of the Wiltshire Curriculum review in Queensland that teachers have been able to call on the support of consultants to help them deal with the significant changes occurring in both the curriculum and within the school community.

In Victoria, the reduction in staff numbers, schools becoming more dependent on, and responsive to parental choice of schools, and allocation of funds based on individual schools Charter of Values has placed increasing pressure on accountability of schools and teachers.

School based management can be stimulating for teachers, students and the community, if it is based on collaborative decision making, recognition of the professionalism of staff, is innovative and engenders feeling of belonging and control. It must however be supported by adequate financing, adequate resourcing, clear and flexible guidelines for curriculum, and control over curriculum and assessment at the school level.

Empowerment is, in its own right, a compelling force in its potential to achieve organisational excellence, but above all it is imperative that we recognise what empowerment is not....Empowerment is not kidding teachers into thinking preplanned initiatives were their ideas. (That is entrapment). Empowerment is not holding out rewards emanating from positive power. (That is enticement). Empowerment is not insisting that participation is mandated from above. (That is enforcement). Empowerment is not increasing the responsibility and the scope of the job in trivial areas. (That is enlargement). Empowerment is not merely concluding that enlarged job expectations just go with the territory. (That is enslavement). Empowerment is, rather, giving teachers a share in important organisational decisions, giving them opportunities to shape organisational goals, purposely providing forums for staff input, and giving real leadership opportunities in school-specific situations that really matter. (Renihan and Renihan quoted in Hargreaves)

It is in this context of school based management, this definition of empowerment, and the mandatory requirement from state education bureaucracies to introduce eight learning areas into the curriculum that the NPDP Health and Physical Education project has taken place.
In Victoria, the CSF provides mandatory curriculum content, closely based on the statement and profile, and quite prescriptive in its intent. In Queensland, the Department of Education, in an enterprise agreement with the Queensland Teachers Union, has chosen to implement the National Mathematics profile only, reprinted under the Queensland title, Student Performance Standards in mathematics. A state developed document, loosely based on the national statement and profile for English is currently being trialed. The implementation of the other areas, or to be more accurate, the voluntary use of the documents for the purpose of planning, has been completely dependent on Commonwealth funds, allocated through NPDP. An exception to this is LOTE which is funded separately.

In these contexts, the schools have volunteered to use the Health and Physical Education statement and profile to review or rewrite their school programs. Teachers, and in particular primary teachers and primary specialist health and physical education teachers, have been confronted with the task of reappraising not only their curriculum content, but the way they define and organise their teaching. Outcomes based education requires teachers to plan, monitor, assess, moderate and report on student achievement, often across at least three levels, and in the primary school across eight learning areas.

Because of the breadth of the learning area, particularly affecting the traditional subject arrangement in secondary schools, teachers have had to collaborate across subject departments and plan cooperatively. In many cases this has proved to be successful and profitable for all parties, in other instances it has been a threatening and unproductive attempt. All schools have emphasised the absolute necessity of support from administration, and this has been evident in the feelings of increased professionalism and recognition of effort in those schools where the administration has been closely involved.

Some schools have focussed, not on the content of the curriculum, but on the development of a common purpose and philosophy for their staff, and have found the opportunity to reflect on their practice both professionally rewarding and motivating.

The stimulus for joining this program was to inject some life into our health and physical education program that has not changed philosophically for many years. The National curriculum statement and profile gave the flexibility to develop an integrated approach. What is more important is that the national documents give structure and purpose to our learning area. The significant thing is they define the scope of the discipline and challenges the professional to have a philosophical base from which to work. (Secondary Health and Physical Education Head of Department).

The absence of a mandatory requirement to develop accredited programs and to report on student achievement has allowed some schools to take a
more innovative and challenging approach to curriculum. For example, one school, on the initiative of the administration and supported by the staff and students, has chosen to work with students in one year level using an Adventure Based Counselling approach to achieve outcomes across three strands of the profile. Because there is no requirement to cover mandatory or core content, there has been the opportunity to experiment with innovative and collaborative strategies, and to include feedback through peer appraisal and student responses. The opportunity to try out new approaches in a supportive and non threatening environment has been one of the more successful outcomes of the project. Even though in Victoria there is a requirement for teachers to write and implement programs by 1996, the 18 months on the project has allowed the schools to trial, review, change or rewrite, or extend their initial experiences.

The involvement of teachers in educational change is vital to its success, especially if the change is complex. If this involvement is to be meaningful and productive, it means more than teachers acquiring new knowledge of curriculum content or new techniques of teaching. Teachers are not just technical learners. Teachers are social learners too (Hargreaves, 1994)

The involvement of teachers in the project, and the opportunity for them to test their ideas, to value what they do and to recognise what they would like to change, has built upon this concept of social learning. The participants have shared their experiences, have worked together to plan and have been supported throughout the process by their peers and the project team. Issues that have arisen during the project have been aired, discussed and strategies suggested and tried. The teachers have welcomed the opportunity to learn more about their area, to renew their knowledge within the area, and to place their subjects within a broader educational context.

In my opinion, the NPDP has done a great thing. It has elevated the average classroom teacher to the status of expert. For many of them it is not something that sits comfortably. They have almost forgotten what it is like to be valued rather than ignored or deliberately excluded as a group with vested interests as opposed to the state. They underestimate their abilities and contribution to the development of curriculum around the nation. (Project teacher 1995)

As a result of involvement in the project, we believe that teachers will be more able to question departmental policies which impact negatively on their teaching, to take more control over their curriculum decisions, and to contribute to ongoing curriculum and resource development at the school and the state level.
As a postscript, the Queensland/Victorian Consortium included representatives from the Victorian Board of Studies, Department of School Education and Deakin University, and in Queensland, the Department of Education, Queensland University of Technology and the University of Queensland. Most of the group had worked together before. At the meeting of representatives of all NPDP projects in September 1995, it was noted that most of the project teams were formed of "old friends and colleagues". In addition to our previous work together as friends and colleagues, the Health and Physical Education team included four of the key writers of the statement and profile and the national learning area manager, as well as the manager of the CSF. This had both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, there was the rare opportunity for the writers to see if the documents were workable, and the comments from the teachers indicated that with ample opportunity to explore, ask questions and with adequate time to digest the changes and differences from their current practice, the documents were easy to use, interesting, challenging and even better still, fun. On the negative side, the writers were placing themselves in a vulnerable position, "putting your money where you

mouth is." They could see changes they would now like to make, and have listened carefully to the critical comments and suggestions of the teachers. It is hoped that these suggestions for improvement and change will be incorporated in future syllabus documents.

At the end of 18 months on the project, the teachers have made it clear that they will insist in their voices being heard in syllabus development. I guess this is on the way to empowerment.

McLean, Kathy and Wilson, Bruce. The Big Picture. pp54-58, Curriculum Perspectives Vol.15 No. 3 September 1995

Rout, Brian. Student Performance Standards pp63-66 Curriculum Perspectives Vol.15 No. 3 September 1995

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