

## Rethinking Professional Knowledge:

Learning Work, Intellectual Work, Hard Work

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This paper reports upon two national, strategic initiatives which have sought to revitalise educational professionalism through facilitated practitioner research. The projects, namely the National Schools Network and the Innovative Links Project for Teacher Professional Development have contributed to the reinvention and renewal of educational professionalism. Education industry workers, be they teachers, academics or policy activists, have been enabled to develop powerful networks and a broadly based learning culture in which critical enquiry is expected, sought after and integral to professional life.

### Introduction:

Workers in the education industry, be they classroom practitioners, policy activists<sup>{1}</sup> or university academics, are operating in an environment in a state of constant flux. They are constantly being enjoined to work harder, work smarter, and work differently. The forty-fifth session of the International Conference on Education (ICE) conducted by UNESCO has found that:

... more and more will be expected of future teachers, whether it be a question of ethical training, training for tolerance, or the ability to manage uncertainty, creativity, solidarity or participation. Teachers

will therefore be appreciated not only for their knowledge and purely technical skills but also for their personal qualities. (Tedesco, 1996, p.1).

Within such a scenario educators are being asked to contribute to increased economic productivity and nationalistic agenda, and to ameliorate difficult social conditions. They are being asked to change their practices, their beliefs about the purposes of education and how they are to be represented as educational professionals in society. Furthermore, they are expected to do this with grace and compliance because, in the politicians' view, education must contribute to the

economic and regional good of the country. The vision of becoming 'The Clever Country' in particular has had a profound effect on how all of these players respond intellectually and professionally to their work. Each is recognising a responsibility to enhance the nation's human capital; but equally they see that they are concerned with the country's social wellbeing, with the development of generations of fulfilled and self managing citizens.

In response to these social and political conditions during the 1990s a variety of school reform and teacher professional development initiatives were taken at the national level in Australia. They had at their core the desire to revitalise teacher professionalism and to improve practice through school based inquiry and action research. The National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning (NPQTL) was established by the federal government as a watershed project for teacher professional development and school renewal. This project spawned three working parties which then gave rise to two major reform projects: the National Schools Project, later the National Schools Network (NSN) and the National Professional Development Project (NPDP) which in turn funded the Innovative Links between Schools and Universities Project for Teacher Professional Development (Innovative Links). These initiatives had as one of their fundamental principles the desire to confront the unchallenged wisdom of experience (Sachs, 1996, p.1). Such a position does not decry the immense experience that educational workers have built up in their professional work but asks them to reach behind that experience to develop a more profound understanding of what it is and what it means.

In this paper we draw on research, publication and professional development activities conducted by the National Schools Network and the Innovative Links project as evidence to support our argument that

such activities provide teachers, policy makers and university academics with a critical and analytical orientation to their practice which will make a strategic contribution to reinventing and renewing teacher professionalism. The Innovative Links Project and the NSN have both demonstrated that when teachers, policy makers and teacher educators move beyond purely practical discourses there is a revitalisation in the ways they see themselves situated in the education industry. The evolution of an informed professional discourse based upon practitioner enquiry has implications in several arenas. Not only does it produce knowledge about teaching and learning which can be used by others to improve and inform their practice, it also provides evidence which may be used in local, regional and national policy formation.

At the core of our argument is the view that education industry professionalism cannot be renewed simply at the individual, school, university or departmental level, it needs to be renewed at the level of the whole profession. In both of these projects the profession was involved through the engagement of a variety of educational stakeholders, principally teachers and academics, but also systems' representatives and education union officers.

It is now timely to briefly outline the nature and activity of the two projects which are effectively the case studies upon which this paper is based{2}.

The National Schools Network:

In its own background information to researchers the NSN describes itself in the following manner:

All members of the Network, including the member schools (200 in the NSN Schools Register in 1995), are bound together by a common set of principles, ideas and ideals which are based on the fundamental belief that we can improve what we do in schools and that we can make a difference to the learning and working lives of students and teachers

who work in them. The focus is to improve schools from within, with external support from the partners in the Network, the unions and employing authorities.

The Network recognises that schools are complex communities which breed complex problems. NSN does not have technical solutions which are to be applied to those problems; rather it creates the conditions for schools to enquire into their own circumstances, identify the challenges, and generate their own resolutions (Groundwater-Smith, 1996a).

As a reform movement the NSN has some unique characteristics. From its inception it has been founded on a partnership between employing authorities (both government and non-government) and teachers' unions in each Australian State and Territory. Ordinarily these relations can be said to be somewhat uneasy and at times difficult and competitive. States and Territories guard their education portfolios carefully and are suspicious of federalism. Similarly relations between employing authorities and unions are often problematic. So the partnership is unusual in a number of respects.

The partnership is a recognition that industrial and professional concerns impact one upon the other; if the conditions under which teachers work are the conditions under which students learn, then it is important to recognise that those conditions carry industrial and professional connotations.

In these ways the NSN, while drawing upon experience from overseas, particularly the United States of America, is not replicating the agenda of those reform movements, which have been driven by economic rationalist arguments rather than educational ones. Shea, Kahane & Sola (1989) have collected a series of essays into an anthology which represents a trenchant critique of reform based upon dominant economic interest groups' determination to rebuild labour productivity and

American economic power at the expense of comprehensive liberal education for all.

The real intent of the reform reports is, in reality, the selecting and sorting of a small corps of technocratic elite for the new high tech

workplace. (Martin, 1989, p. 54).

While the Network has as a basic premise that schools must meet the learning needs of students in a rapidly changing world it does not see itself as instrumental in selecting and nurturing only those students who may be the designers and planners of that world. This is an essential difference between the American and Australian reform movements{3}.

The NSN focus for action is best summed up in the concluding comments of the review of the National Schools Program from which it arose. Such areas of action could include:

- Collaborative working relationships among and between teachers, non-teaching staff and students.
  
- Changes to school culture and climate to make schools a better workplace for teaching and learning.
  
- Structural/Organisational change (such as changes to timetabling etc.). This includes cooperative arrangements with external bodies able to contribute to the work of the school.
  
- Applications of technologies to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching, learning, assessment etc. (NPQTL, 1993, p. 35).

In realising these actions the Network operates within schools, within states and territories and across states and territories. As well as facilitating local school reform it conducts a range of professional development activities. Among them has been a series of week long professional development schools (in conjunction with the now defunct Australian Teaching Council). These schools are developed and operated with university partners and have been undertaken as far afield as Tasmania and the Northern Territory. Teachers, some of whom are in teams, are funded for registration, travel and accommodation. Typically, two hundred of eight hundred applicants are funded.

Finally, in this brief discussion of the work of the National Schools Network it is important to recognise that it sees for itself a

responsibility to systematically enquire into the reforms themselves. The Network has a research office whose task it is to build a culture of research in member schools as an integral part of their rethinking processes (Harradine, 1996, p.1). To foster the development of such a research culture the Network has established a competitively selected Researcher Register of academics in the field of school reform. As well as supporting research at the local level the office also commissions cross site enquiries focused upon issues of strategic significance as they are identified by the NSN's Steering Committee{4}. It is expected that such enquiries will be participative and liberatory for those who are involved, school practitioners and university academics alike. Importantly, the NSN sees the recommendations arising from such research as fundamental to its own policy activism.

#### Innovative Links:

The Innovative Links project is an example of a nation-wide initiative that is challenging established conceptions as to what schooling, teacher professionalism and teacher education is about. It complements and builds upon the experience of NSN. This is not by chance. Key academics were members of an NSN academic reference group which asked specific questions about the relationship between research and practice in the work of teachers. Conceptually and organisationally, then, the Innovative Links project was built upon the procedures, learnings and principles of participation established through the National Schools Network (and its predecessor, the National Schools Project). As part of the discussion a new and reciprocal element emerged about the relationship between research and practice in the work of university academics in the field of teacher education. The project was implemented in 1994 and is now completing its third and final year. It has been designed to move participants beyond their accustomed ways of doing things and their familiar relationships (Yeatman & Sachs, 1995).

The Innovative Links project represents formal and explicit partnerships between schools and universities which are seen as central to the renewal and development of teacher professionalism; this is enabled by the formation of local roundtables comprising five to six schools and academic associates from the affiliated university. As Yeatman and Sachs observe for the first time the relationship between

teacher education faculties in universities and schools has come onto the school reform/restructuring agenda in Australia. The project focuses the spotlight on the question of how this relationship should be designed and developed so as to facilitate the professional development of both school and university based practitioners.

Innovative Links is new and significant for the following reasons:

teacher professional development has been designed and developed on a whole school basis in ways which break traditional classroom isolation and network teachers into ongoing-school based learning communities and professional conversations;

it has developed as a formal and explicit relationship the partnership between practicing teachers and teacher educators in ways which are designed to foster professional development of both of these partners; and

this is a formal partnership between participating schools and universities on a scale that is of system wide impact and significance. (Yeatman & Sachs, 1995, p.21)

In their formative evaluation of the project Yeatman and Sachs (1995) described it as heroic. The metaphor "heroic" is not used lightly. Innovative Links can be seen as contributing to the overall vision underlying educational restructuring on a national scale. In terms of its scope the project has provided the opportunity for 14 universities, across 16 campuses, to be involved in a project that has as its core feature the idea of partnerships between practicing teachers on a whole school basis and university based teacher educators. This is approximately one third of universities in Australia involved in a coherent teacher professional development project. Added to this are some 100 schools which include state, independent, catholic representatives and some 80 academic associates. If one considers that in October 1995 approximately 2000 professional development activities would be funded by the project since its beginning, involving 1,700 teachers (Yeatman and Sachs, 1995) then the term "heroic" is not

hyperbolic. This project also represents the first time that a significant amount of public money (\$3 million) has been coordinated by university academics in conjunction with school personnel for teacher and academic professional development.

The roundtable structure of Innovative Links provides an important forum for the regular discussion of emergent issues; in some states and territories regional roundtables have also developed. The project also provides for an annual national forum with representation from all of the roundtables and other industry partners such as the teachers' unions and the NSN.

The basic premise upon which Innovative Links and NSN is formulated is the construction of a learning society. In the context of schooling, teachers can be regarded as providing the leadership and facilitation of processes, whereby students learn the skills and knowledge which enable them to take responsibility for their own learning. Within such a context student learning is only one of the dimensions. Teacher learning must be incorporated, as must academic learning and systems learning if the idea of a learning society is to be fully realised.

In taking the idea of learning further a number of questions arise which have implications for how the profession of teaching is renewed and teacher professionalism is reinvented. These questions include:

what conditions will enhance the learning opportunities for practitioners themselves?

how can schools, university faculties and policy units be organised in ways which foster and facilitate educational practitioners taking responsibility for their own learning which enable them to improve and develop their work practices? and

in developing a culture where professional learning is expected and supported, how can teachers, academics and policy makers develop processes and networks that enable them to work collaboratively in the joint endeavour of improvement of practice? (Sachs, 1996, p.3)

Responses to these questions provide the scaffolding for professional development and the renewal of educational professionalism as conceptualised in the Innovative Links and NSN projects.

These then are our two cases. They are major projects both conceptually and strategically. They have been recognised nationally as significant interventions in rethinking educational professionalism. They assist us in examining the two key questions which this paper addresses, these being:

What are the conditions that help support and sustain the production, development, publication and utilisation of teacher professional knowledge?

How can systems and professional organisations build on initiatives such as Innovative Links and NSN to enable educational practitioners to develop a sustained research voice which both embodies theoretical and practical discourse?

Rethinking Educational Professional Discourses: Producing, developing, publishing and utilising educational professional knowledge.

The production and development of educational professional knowledge:

Clearly both of the projects reported upon in this paper have seized two contemporary principles of organisational development: networking and a learning organisation approach to change and development. The two networks have been powerful and far reaching and each is enmeshed with

the other. One cannot underestimate their national scope, particularly for the teachers involved. Much has been made of the isolation of the teacher in the classroom; but not enough is known of the consequences

of placing borders around teachers' work by regions and states. The boundaries of the learning organisation as represented in the broad projects and the individual school projects are variable, local and national, across various industry partners and centred on developing new relationships and modes of operation between schools and universities and other education stakeholders.

At the centre of these projects is their concern to raise questions and issues that confront what it means to be a teacher, an academic and a policy activist and how to deal with the complexities, dilemmas and tensions of modern day educational life. At the heart of both is a desire to improve the work practices and conditions of students and teachers in our schools.

These projects, in different ways, provide models for new possibilities in terms of work organisation, access to information and knowledge and make teachers particularly active agents in their own transformation and their desire to create and shape their futures. By participating in these projects teachers have developed new ways to think about their work and about transforming their work practices. Teachers have developed political skills such as networking, advocacy and effective communication. These are not the norm in terms of teacher professional development activities. They move well beyond the reproduction types of teacher education identified by Beyer and Zeichner (1987) and are directed towards transformative ends.

Significantly these projects have been political by their very conception and execution. By challenging orthodox practices and working from within existing structures to revitalise their practices teachers are taking control of their own professional development. They are becoming skilled political practitioners. By extending previous professional relationships and finding new ways of working with other education partners teachers are developing and implementing their newfound political knowledge. In this way they become pro-active in shaping their educational futures.

As Sachs (1996) observed in her Cambridge paper renewing teacher professionalism means moving beyond what Friedson (1994) calls a commonsense idea of professionalism, that is a profession's portrayal of profession. A commonsense idea of professionalism is developed passively: it is not elaborated, systematised or refined self consciously so much as it grows out of everyday social usage. The

provision of a range and variety of forums for the discussion of the work of both Innovative Links and NSN is ensuring a strengthening of the professional voice.

An important condition for the emergence of a stronger professional voice has been the development of a coherent, critical mass of teacher reformers working closely with academic associates and policy

activists. But such a mass, in and of itself, is not sufficient, what is significant is the realisation by the participants that they have a responsibility to make public their professional voice.

#### Publishing Professional Knowledge:

The research and publication activity of Innovative Links and NSN have enabled them both to contribute to the development of a growing body of professional knowledge which is owned by the teaching profession itself. As Vivienne White (1996) observed, following the NSN's first national reform conference:

Teachers have a rich professional knowledge base about what works and what doesn't and how to improve their classroom work. What is difficult though is finding ways to share this knowledge with each other. As schools become more complex and learning, rather than teaching, becomes the main focus, we will need to develop a knowledge base that can be shared across classrooms, schools and even across countries. (White, 1996, p.2)

Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993) have characterised teacher enquiry as a "way of knowing" (p.41). They argue for the practitioner to have greater control of the research agenda and to be encouraged to have greater confidence in their own professional knowledge. Furthermore, Altrichter, Posch & Somekh (1993) argue that it is essential to make teachers' knowledge public. By creating a collaborative relationship between the school practitioners, the academics and the policy activists we contend that we have been able to develop a learning culture which not only recognises and publishes teacher professional knowledge and researcher "expert" knowledge (about research), but also makes that knowledge problematic. Throughout the conduct of the

Innovative Links roundtables and the NSN facilitated practitioner research there have been possibilities for participants to check each other's perspectives, in effect to check in what Somekh (1994) calls The trustworthiness of (the) research knowledge (p.371).

Robinson (1992) has claimed that educational research contributes little to the resolution of educational problems. Her argument rests on the tradition of research being conducted in a manner which effectively quarantines the researcher from the school based practitioner. Traditionally, researchers do not take sufficient account of the theories of action of the participants, neither do they work with them to publish accounts of practice. This is not the case in these projects. The teachers' theories of action lie at the heart of the studies produced by the projects and the research has been constructed in such a way as to allow a critical dialogue between the academics as the outsiders, and the research associates, as the insiders, using the policy activists as sounding boards in terms of the broader educational agenda. Each, in turn, has been engaged in similar dialogue with their peers. Furthermore, it has not been the role of the academics to instigate solutions to problems, but to be co-learners, working with socially recognisable evidence (see Ladwig, 1994) about the nature of

change in the nominated schools. First and foremost, these research projects are learning projects in which the participating schools, the academics, the National Schools Network and the Innovative Links project are all constituted as active learners in understanding the nature of change.

Both NSN and Innovative Links have their publishing arms. They regularly publish newsletters, research snapshots and case studies and, in the case of the NSN, there is a home page on the world wide web. Many of the articles are written by teachers, others are written in partnership with university colleagues, some are policy oriented editorials. Not all documentation is via written texts; both projects have developed video materials and professional development modules which will assist others in conceptualising and understanding the reforms which have occurred.

This brings us to the matter of utilisation. How is the activity of these two projects being utilised in educational reform?

## Utilising Educational Professional Knowledge:

It has been argued elsewhere (Groundwater-Smith, 1996b) that in these projects we have been engaged in is continuous problem solving within the context of the given schools and indeed, the universities. The solutions are themselves tentative and open to reconceptualisation.

Clearly, continuous problem solving requires developing specific solutions which are, in effect, custom built. This is not to say that there may not be strategies which others have tried which become useful; but rather to adopt such strategies only to the extent that they have relevance to the problem in hand. Much of the innovations work of the seventies foundered because solutions were applied inappropriately to local problems. Altrichter, Posch & Somekh (1993) see the situation in this way:

No advice from experienced colleagues, and no book can replace your own analysis of the situation, an understanding of its complexities, and a clear view of what you are aiming for. But both sources may yield valuable ideas if they fall on fertile ground: if you have already developed an understanding of the situation and possible action strategies which can be broadened and modified by external suggestions. This is because such suggestions, instead of remaining discrete and separate, are integrated with your own conception of the situation. (p.160)

However, behind the specifics of the case there lie dilemmas which are

recognisable to educators working in the field of reform. For example: "How fast should we proceed?" Move too quickly and some will feel unsure, even alienated; move too slowly and others will become frustrated and thwarted. As well, continuous problem solving requires patience and tolerance. Again the process is beset by dilemmas. People are at different points in the change process; some are highly committed and anxious to proceed, others concerned to be well grounded before commencing. The learnings arising from such dilemmas have important consequences at the systems level particularly in relation to the professional development of teachers. These emergent understandings have informed the kind of professional development offered by the

National Schools Network which operates so widely across the country. Both state and national professional development activities have drawn directly upon the facilitated practitioner research conducted by the Network and Innovative Links.

Giroux (1988) believes that teachers have it in them to be intellectuals, capable of transforming the conditions of schooling. But they are not going to achieve that kind of intellectual power by being the subjects of traditional teacher inservice professional development. Indeed, he argues that teachers should resist the technical, top down forms of inservice teacher education which educational employing authorities use to ensure fidelity to their policies. Instead, they need to feel more confident about their capacity to analyse and critique policies and engage in a kind of critical discourse. While, specifically, the Innovative Links project has provided just such a forum through its roundtables and the National Schools Network through its week long professional development schools; more generally each is itself an embodiment of that critical discourse.

The professional knowledge generated by the Innovative Links project and the NSN is being utilised to inform educational change. It is "the rub between theory and practice" (Darling Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995, p. 599) which holds a particular credibility with the profession. It closes the gap between what Somekh (1994) refers to as the castle of the school and the castle of the academy. Importantly, for teacher education it also provides a new kind of relationship with the field. Grimmett (1995) argues that through field based partnerships new forms of teacher education can emerge. We would go further, we would want to say that through field based partnerships a new tertiary pedagogy can emerge; a kind of teaching and learning grounded in the practical challenges of schooling directed to enhancing our society and its members' ability to make a worthwhile contribution to that society.

Building on the Experience:

So what has been learnt here? If partnerships involving the broad range of educational workers are to be successful and to become an integral part of their professional lives then there must be opportunities to try out and refine new practices in a publicly and professionally accountable manner. These projects have demonstrated how this can be done by:

establishing and developing new roles (critical friend, resources person, sounding board, advocate etc.);

establishing new structures (advisory groups, local, regional and national networks);

working on new tasks (proposal writing, documentation, researching);

creating a culture of inquiry, whereby professional learning and dissemination is expected, sought after, rewarded and an integral and ongoing part of institutional and personal life.

The question currently being asked by teachers, unionists, bureaucrats and academics is will the success and heroism of these projects be recognised and rewarded with continuing funding by the new government? Or will they be casualties of a new administration which wants to discard the achievements of its predecessor?

These projects represent significant investments, in both fiscal and human resource terms. They have been funded to the tune of many millions of dollars over the past three years. They have resulted in an enriched professional community, poised to strengthen the work of educators by continuing to ask the difficult questions about the nature of teaching and learning. It would not be clever for the 'clever country' to waste so valuable an investment involving learning work, intellectual work and hard work.

#### Acknowledgements:

We recognise that this synthesis of the two projects reported here draws upon the intellectual and practical labour of many educational

professionals across Australia. Several thousand teachers have been involved in the work of the two projects. Over one hundred academics have contributed in one way or another to their activity. Each project has been coordinated at local, regional, state and federal levels. While we cannot name them all we do particularly wish to thank Vivienne White, the Coordinator of the National Schools Network. Her vision and strength have powerfully informed both projects.

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FOOTNOTES\*\*\*\*\*

{1} The term 'policy activist' is used here to encompass those workers in the education industry whose major purpose is to inform policy in very direct ways. For example the president of the Australian Education Union, Sharan Burrow, and the National Coordinator of the National Schools Network, Vivienne White, can both be seen as working in the policy area, in close consultation with the education field of practice. They are cited specifically here because they have both been generative in the development of the two projects discussed in this paper.

{2} For more detailed accounts of Innovative Links and NSN see Sachs, 1996; and Groundwater-Smith, 1996. These two papers were delivered as keynote addresses at a conference which had as its central focus practitioner research; our focus in this paper has now progressed to issues associated with the knowledge which is produced by such research.

{3} An exception to this is the work of the Coalition of Essential Schools in the USA. The coalition, like NSN, has a concern for equity and social justice.

{4} One such example has been the investigation of curriculum and assessment reform in the context of school reculturing (Groundwater-Smith, 1996b). Three case study schools worked closely with the external researcher to examine questions regarding curriculum and assessment change in ways which allowed cross site comparisons to

be made. Importantly a teacher researcher was appointed in each school. The teacher researcher not only acted as the on site investigator, but also worked closely with the whole school staff to validate the findings which emerged. Professional learning was thus available to the

schools, the academic researcher and the Network.

{5} It could be argued, to some extent, that action research itself has been appropriated by employing authorities as an implementation tool. In these instances teachers' accounts of their work are used as illustrative and exemplary material in professional development activities. Innovative Links and NSN has sought to avoid such outcomes by eschewing the discourse of best practice'.