TOWARDS A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING COMMUNITY

ABSTRACT

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This is a case study of a group of teachers introducing multi-age classes at a rural primary school. The study focuses on teachers' and the principal's perceptions and learning as they work through this educational change process. The study documents the development of collaborative learning and collegial support, with an emphasis on the role of professional dialogue in an internal school support group. The context of this case study is one facing all Australian schools: the challenges created by the rapidly changing post-modern society in which schools operate. Thus, the overriding themes are related to professional learning for educational change via collaborative processes.

The study provides insights into a) the development of collaborative learning and collegial support amongst a group of teachers introducing a shared innovation; b) the process of fostering professional dialogue as a means of resolving professional dilemmas and of enabling workplace-based professional development; c) teachers' voices during a period of non-mandated change; a change which requires a fundamental rethinking of the elements of the teaching-learning process (planning; teaching and learning strategies; and assessment) and of classroom management and relationships; and d) the role of the principal in facilitating professional learning and inquiry through a change process. This presentation will provide a discussion of emerging ideas from the research-to-date (over the period of eight months). Data was collected via an initial questionnaire, semi-structured focus group discussions, individual semi-structured interviews and personal reflections.

1.1 Introduction:

Schools are being buffeted by continual change - political, social, educational. In such a tumultuous environment it is easy to become cynical, to lose the vision - the purpose - that led teachers to become teachers. Rather than become victims of change, educators need to reignite their purposes, revisit their visions, and enjoy "the dance of leadership: at the still point of the turning world" (Duignan, 1997).
This is the story of one school’s attempts to break the shackles of the traditional by living its shared vision (Senge, 1990). This dream is based on the premise that every student can learn well. A group of teachers, who see this vision as both possible and the ideal, introduced multi-age classes at our school in 1997. Multi-age classes have been introduced previously before - a double 2/3/4/7 class in 1996. However, never before had a group of teachers directly challenged the commonly held notion - the basic proposition that the vast majority of primary schools are based on - that graded classes are best for every child’s learning.

The philosophy of co-operative learning permeates the thinking of many of the teachers in this group, as does the idea that if we can create a true collaborative community of learners (Cooper, 1994), there will be better learning outcomes for all students.

This is a story being told via action-research (Kemmis, 1994; McNiff, 1988) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, 1989), with myself, the principal, as participant observer (Jorgensen, 1989). It is a story similar in intent, and in many ways in content, to those emerging through the National Schools Network (Groundwater-Smith, 1996; Hill, 1993; McRae, 1996; Peters, Dobbins and Johnson, 1996). While the focus is on telling the story of a school’s attempts to "reculture" (Hargreaves, 1994; Fullan, 1993) to create a learning community, the difference is that it is not an outsider (a consultant) telling the story.

This brings both significant benefits and disadvantages. As the principal I am an insider (of sorts), and know these teachers well. Having worked with these teachers for between two and four years, I believe I have a good understanding of their individual purposes and desires (Hargreaves, 1994). Some I count amongst my personal friends, because our approaches to life, in general, and our philosophies of teaching, in particular, are in accord. I am privy to many of their inner fears and ultimate goals as teachers. On the other hand, my relationship with these teachers is always distorted in some ways because I am the principal, and old hierarchical ways of thinking die hard. Perhaps this principal-teacher power imbalance affects what they say more than I understand; perhaps wanting to please the principal is more pervasive than I comprehend.

In undertaking this research I set out with the firm notion of listening to and recording teachers’ voices (Hargreaves, 1994). As principal, I want and need to understand what motivates teachers as they deal with change; how they can be supported and support each other through the planning and implementation of innovation; how I can foster a culture of continuous collegial learning; how, together, we can improve children’s learning; how we can really become a "learning school" (McRae, 1996) and a "collaborative learning community" (Cooper, 1994).
1.2 Rationale for the Study

The world around us is changing rapidly (Beare, 1990; Beare and Slaughter, 1993; Sharpe, 1994). Schools, traditionally conservative organisations, are caught in the middle of the multitude of paradoxes of the postmodern world (Handy, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994). Teachers are facing the challenges of a new technological environment governed by economic rationalist thinking at government level and changing societal norms. During the 1990s there has been and, there will probably continue to be, a rash of mandated changes in education impinging on teachers in classrooms. Teachers are only too aware of Hargreaves' (1994: x) "changing times". The difficulty lies in working out how to respond to these pressures and ambiguities in effective and ethical ways, so that student learning for now, and for a very different unknown future, can be enhanced.

The current literature on organisations and leadership focuses on the need for organisational learning in the postmodern world (for example, Cooper and Henderson, 1994; Fullan, 1993; Handy, 1993; Hargreaves, 1994; Limerick and Cunnington, 1998; Senge, 1990). These authors all point to changing organisational structures, and the need for cultures which value non-hierarchical, collaborative relationships; continuous learning for continuous improvement; "integrity, authenticity, loyalty, honesty, and trust" (Sharpe, 1994); change agency; and moral purpose. Whether they be called learning organisations (Senge, 1990) or collaborative learning communities (Cooper, 1994), the characteristics and the purposes are the same: to learn and grow in collaboration and concert with other organisational members - to be co-dancers (Duignan, 1997).

This study documents how members of one staff are endeavouring to create the structures and culture to nurture collaboration, learning and community in their school - that is, are endeavouring to build a collaborative learning community.

Through the National Schools Network, the fascinating stories of other schools on similar journeys have been shared. Other Australian schools such as Hincks Avenue (Whyalla, South Australia), Ashfield Boys High School (Sydney, New South Wales), Canadian Lead Primary School (Ballarat, Victoria), and St Patrick’s (New South Wales) - all part of the National Schools Network - have embarked on challenging learning journeys characterised by "interrelatedness and interdependency" (Duignan, 1997:11). These stories have been affirming, enlightening, supporting and challenging. That these short stories - snapshots of some elements of life in other schools - were so engaging and informative reinforced my belief that, as teaching professionals, we need to examine and record what happens in schools, and share what happens as we confront the underlying assumptions on which so many aspects of school life are based; when we meet change in proactive ways; when we critically examine our practices; when we meet with like-minded educators to support each other through change; when teachers learn together.
Through this study, I hope to pay tribute to the professionalism of teachers, record their voices, and further enhance my skills as the leader of the dance (Duignan, 1997), and the leader of leaders (Gordon, 1992).

1.3 The Research Focus

This study is investigating the insights and perceptions of a group of teachers at a Queensland primary school as they deal with the muddy turbulence of change. The change in this case is not mandated by the government nor imposed by the school’s administration. Rather, it is the result of ongoing professional discussion at the school about how best to cater for children’s learning needs. The change investigated is the implementation of multi-age classes in nine out of 17 classes in the school. While this change is a major structural and cultural one for this particular school, and quite specific in its nature, I believe that the issues dealt with in this story are representative of those faced by any school endeavouring to implement change through examination of its underpinning values and beliefs; its curriculum; its teaching and learning practices; its relationships between teachers and students, teachers and parents, and teachers and teachers; its way of organising learning, and so on.

This is a small-scale case study of one school in rural Queensland. A qualitative methodology is being used to ascertain perceptions, thus highlighting the complexity of issues, dilemmas and paradoxes teachers face as they question their classroom practices, implement change, and learn together. An action-research framework is used, complemented by elements of appreciative inquiry and participant observer methodology.

The key problem upon which this study is focused is:

- How can teachers work together to create a collaborative learning community?

In addressing the research problem, the following research questions provide the basis upon which the design of this study is developed:

Research Question 1: What do teachers see as their key purposes and desires as educators?

Research Question 2: What changes do they see as necessary to facilitate effective teaching and learning as we head into the 21st century?
Research Question 3: How can teachers best be supported as learners implementing educational changes?

Research Question 4: How can principals facilitate teacher collaboration and learning in the introduction of educational changes?

1.4 Methodology

The majority of members of this study were invited “volunteers” from the school staff involved in the introduction of multi-age classes in 1997. Only one member of this group of teachers had taught multi-age before. Four other teachers were specifically invited to be part of the study. One teacher was on leave until Term 3 1997, but is an experienced multi-age teacher and a keen advocate. Two specialist teachers - the Support Teacher - Learning Difficulties and LOTE teacher - were also included, because of their key roles in assisting teachers, and their support for the concept. The other invited member of the group is the principal of a local small school, who is also teaching a multi-age class for the first time. Having been an educational adviser in mathematics for the previous two years, and having worked with other group members during this time, it was felt that she could contribute some different perceptions from a “critical friend” perspective.

The study was conducted over the 1997 school year. The group met once each Term, including late in 1997 for a final review of the year. Prior to the first meeting, each member was contacted individually, by letter and personally, to explain the structure and purposes of the research study. Group members were asked to complete a short questionnaire designed to give baseline data on teachers’ purposes and desires through the introduction of this innovation. The format and content of meetings was negotiated with the group, so that each meeting could serve at least two purposes: (i) sharing of ideas and support for teachers, and (ii) collection of data for the research project. I personally wanted the meetings to be learning episodes, times of professional inquiry, clarifying issues and sharing ideas. I also wanted them to be celebratory occasions - acknowledging the successes, the risk-taking, and the learning that is part and parcel of innovation.

Each meeting took the form of a focus-group discussion. These discussions were taped, with members’ approval. Both the “critical friend” and I, as participant researcher, provided feedback to group members at the end of each meeting. The type of feedback varied, but provided a focus for future learning, and was designed to keep motivation and support going.

Where I wanted to follow up on ideas from the meeting or from observations in classrooms, individual interviews were also conducted. Teachers were also asked to keep personal learning journals to record their reflections - feelings, experiences, observations and ideas.
Both the critical friend and I kept learning journals, to describe the journey from an outsider’s perspective and from that of the leader learner.

1.5 Significance of the Study

Schools across Australia are facing similar dilemmas as they endeavour to both implement mandated policy, based on economic rationalise thinking, and assist children in becoming adaptable, skilful learners for a very uncertain future. There are frequent waves of new government policies aimed at reforming schools. Restructuring, though more at central and regional rather than local levels, is a relatively common occurrence, reflecting the rapidity and totality of the change environment in which education takes place. While governments debate the best ways to make schools produce better learning outcomes for their students, the workers in schools try to deal with the interface of the tried and tested from the past and the new social and economic demands being placed on them by different sectors of society.

Those in schools are at varying stages of awareness of the complexities of postmodern times. Many administrators and teachers are starting to understand that the “we’ve always done it this way” mental modes of traditional schooling systems need to be challenged; indeed, many of the long under-questioned practices of schools need review. Realising that things need to change, is, of course, very different from doing something effective, and sustainable, about it. As educators we need to become critical inquirers, finding out how worthwhile change can be facilitated, and how teachers can be supported through change processes.

Fullan (1991) accuses principals of being conservative and upholding the status quo; of only tinkering at the edges. Hargreaves (1994) points out that teachers rarely see the "big picture", that they are expected to implement almost continuous changes without a deep understanding of the why. Little wonder that legislated policy is rarely implemented as the policy makers intend (Maxcy, 1993). Little wonder that the bureaucratic, isolationist, egg-crate mental modes of schools (Hargreaves, 1994) are relatively change resistant. Unlike many other organisations and professions, schools and teachers remain very similar over the past fifty years. As Drucker (1993:209) has stated, "no other institution faces challenges as radical as those that will transform the school".

Caldwell (1996:1) has called for total reform, "re-engineering", of schools to cope with the new Knowledge Society. This re-engineering must focus on a fundamental rethinking and redesign of processes in schools to revise and enhance approaches to teaching and learning. Ashenden (1994:13) notes that "The greatest single weakness in these reforms is that they stop at the classroom door. The classroom is ... a 19th Century workplace ... an inefficient and inequitable producer of the old basics and simply incompatible with the new".
Thus every school needs to be looking at its classrooms and the operation of teaching and learning. We need to challenge old assumptions and look at ways of restructuring and reculturing. As stated earlier, this is not an easy process. It, therefore, seems important that those schools that do embark on this tortuous journey document their efforts to make sense of the paradoxes of post-modernism and their reflections on re-engineering their school to be more responsive to the technologies around them.

This study does not look at specific teaching learning processes, and certainly does not delve into the complexities of changing schools from "puffer billy locomotive(s) chugging incongruously through a high-tech landscape" (Papert, 1993; cited in Caldwell, 1996:3). However, it does look at the processes and perceptions of a group of teachers working through associated issues in relation to learning and teaching: learner-centred and interactive activities; learner-directed learning; meta-cognition and life-long learning; contextualised learning; transformative learning; co-operative learning; just-in-time learning; teacher role as collaborator, co-learner and facilitator of learning; a learning emphasis on relationships and inquiry, and quality rather than quantity; (after Bawden, 1989; Shank, n.d.; and Ellyard, 1996; cited in Lepani, 1996). This study also explores issues related to working in teams and of leadership in schools. The significance of this case study is in unpacking the muddy, sometimes messy, processes involved in transforming a school from a factory model to one of a collaborative learning community, capable of upholding its moral purpose: "to make a difference in the lives of students regardless of background, and to help produce citizens who can live and work productively in increasingly dynamically complex societies" (Fullan, 1993:4) and of skilled individual change agency.

1.6 The Findings:

1.6.1 Teachers' Voices Through Change

While we undoubtedly live in a world of immense change, it is important to note that this change affects different people in different ways. Change is an intensely personal process, which relies on changes to individual thinking, feelings and actions (Duck, 1993). Evans (1993), Fullan (1993), Hargreaves (1994) and Sikes (1992), have all emphasised the importance of teachers' attitudes to change in the implementation of change. Many teachers enter teaching because they care about children or want to contribute to improvement of society; they cannot be given a purpose, but need a "moving mission", subject to continuous dialogue, that reaffirms moral purpose (Hargreaves, 1995).

Despite the level of change in which these teachers were involved their voices reflected a strong sense of professional satisfaction and of collegial support. The following reflections by teachers provide an indication of their feeling of personal purpose: "I'm enjoying my teaching partners ... Hungry for the challenge! Looking forward to next year! and "Learning is a positive thing. Having support enables you to feel good about the challenge that lies ahead." Another teacher responded that "the network meetings, books from the library on multi-age and school visits" have all helped.
One teacher reflected the kind of professionalism that leads to effective change in classrooms: I want to do it better than this year! ... Having fairly recently returned to teaching from 'home duties', I have definitely moved from survival and may eventually reach comfort and competence." Another stated that "In many ways I have really enjoyed this year. I have especially enjoyed the children. I’m very glad my 6-7 became a 5/6/7. One positive has been witnessing the growth of genuine community; watching the classroom interactions, older mentors/tutors, and younger students aiming so high. My classroom ‘works’ - students identify themselves quite happily as part of the ‘5/6/7’ and wish to remain a part of this community." This statement reflects Beare's (1990:8) notion of the kind of "quite special teachers" required to be "a liberating influence", fostering communion and community, creative energy, and cosmic harmony.

School culture needs to value diversity of experience and differences of viewpoint (Hargreaves, 1995). Although there was some sense at the end of 1996 that the introduction of multi-age classes might create staff division and disharmony, this does not appear to have happened. A new teacher to the school commented on the supportive atmosphere, adding: "No-one has personally condemned multi-age to me or attacked my beliefs." Another member suggested that "Change can be very exciting and stimulating. It causes some people to feel very uncomfortable and can factionalise groups. We need a sense of humour."

As Hargreaves (1995) has suggested, teachers need opportunities to work and learn together. The network has provided such a starting point. "There has been a positive outlook and commitment to the multi-age philosophy by teachers. I have had great discussions with Harriett and Lin. The supportive, warm atmosphere of all our multi-age classrooms is evident. In implementing change we need to start with a small group of people who are committed to making ‘things’ work. Support these people to manage and feel good about their achievements. Keep talking about it! Promote discussion within the school community regarding achievements, difficulties and solutions."

While imposed changes often limit professional freedom and autonomy (Sikes, 1992), this non-mandated change does not appear to have had this effect. One participant commented that "It is essential to keep an open mind and a willingness to accept whatever is necessary to improve student learning, while another commented that The process must be sustainable and have a professional back-up which encourages those making the change."

1.6.2 The Development of Collaborative Learning and Collegial Support

The participants in this group were very positive about the learning outcomes and development of collegial support throughout the year via Network meetings. One teacher commented

"I feel good about the positiveness of those in the multi-age support network group. ... (The network meetings are ) very effective! Even with planned Year level meetings for next year, I feel the multi-age network meetings would still be of great benefit. I’d love to have them more often - monthly? ... I value the sharing of ideas and strategies."
Another indicated that the network meetings were "very effective - the other multi-age teachers in this school have some fantastic ideas and it is very beneficial to talk to them and then adapt their ideas. The Learning Support Teacher has also had a profound effect on me. She has excellent ideas and resources to share with us ... I find the other teachers’ willingness to share ideas and their feelings about how things are going is important. When other teachers can share their knowledge of reference books etc for me to refer to, it is helpful ... it is rewarding to attend." A new staff member found meetings "Excellent. Sharing of ideas and failures all helps."

Another teacher was less impressed, saying that network meetings are "OK. Good to hear similar problems have been experienced by most of us. I have sometimes come away with feelings of dissatisfaction caused by others’ stories of consistent and great successes, when I find my days are still extremely busy, often trying, and could always have been improved. Probably I am hard on myself and generally suspicious of people who have all the answers." She also commented on the issue of time: "digressions are frustrating, and there is the ever present situation of the talkers and the listeners. I would have personally preferred a monthly night time meeting."

The Learning Support Teacher felt that network meetings were positive because of "the sharing of ideas, and of solutions to problems and challenges" and "the developing sense of collegial support." She felt that "so many planning, Effective Learning and Teaching ideas" were shared via network meetings.

Teachers indicated that they "learnt" as beginning multi-age teachers by

- trial and error, reflection and refinement
- reading - books, multi-age newsletters, journal articles
- professional sharing and discussion with colleagues at the school
- using what works in straight classes and modifying where necessary
- "refinement of best practice through constant discussion with my teaching partner"

These comments reflect elements of Senge’s (1993; cited in Committee, 1994) "learning organisation": continual expansion of capacity to create desired results; nurturing of new and expansive patterns of thinking; collective aspiration and continual learning how to learn together.

The critical friend’s reflections, after the final meeting for the year, expressed the progress of this group in terms of collegial support and collaborative learning: "Having missed several sessions to this one I was surprised - pleasantly - by what I saw as a more positive and upbeat mood in the group. ... Perhaps because the pressure of report card writing at the previous time (although this is also the case now), or less confidence and /or experience by participants or because of the presence of (another teacher) in the focus group with which I worked - a more pessimistic, overwhelming and external pattern of blame for perceived difficulties or challenges at the time was evident to me. Comments which contributed to this
former group’s climate also perhaps inhibited the contributions by other participants who were certainly more positive and willing to share today.

Our critical friend raised the critical issue of group dynamics: "How many less than positive (and skilled) participants can an innovating group manage successfully to include? I suggest very few, perhaps only one in a group this size. A ‘buddy’ to confirm the misconceptions of a ‘wait and see’ or a ‘convince me before I try or learn by doing’ does not contribute a great deal to the other members who have a real commitment to learn and grow. ... Enthusiasm creates positive reflections. It promotes the healthier attitude of looking for and celebrating the positives." This is a critical issue when our goal is whole school change. Our current network is a group of professionals committed to the concept of multi-age. During many other change processes we do not have the luxury of volunteers.

### 1.6.3 The Fostering of Professional Dialogue

Reculturing, as espoused by Hargreaves (1994:255), is about changes in basic beliefs, practices and working relationships, to facilitate teachers working and planning together, creating a culture of collaboration, risk and improvement. Participants voiced their belief that the network meetings have stimulated increasing professional dialogue and shared inquiry. A number of benefits emerged in the survey responses:

- the sharing of effective teaching practice. One teacher commented on the more open discussion of ideas, with greater justifying and questioning of the value of a particular strategy or activity. Others commented that the discussion about catering for individual needs was important.
- professional learning via discussion with peers and guest speakers who "made me want to read more and more!"
- the sharing of ideas, which cut down on wastage of time by re-inventing the wheel
- sharing of new resources - commercial and teacher-made.
- a forum for expression of needs
- personal development of concept/understanding of the multi-age classroom

A number of teachers indicated that professional dialogue might be enhanced by one topic (eg management of spelling or reading, use of technology, classroom routines) being the focus for each meeting.

For one teacher the opportunity for intensive discussion enabled her to introduce co-operative teaching ideas and strategies and made her "more aware of useful thinking skills, problem-solving ideas and how to present them to children."
Another teacher found that the meetings supported him as a learner as they "introduced me to a wider variety of planning and teaching strategies that other people have used successfully. Meetings made me more aware of professional reading materials that are relevant and effective."

One teacher, who found these meetings did not meet her needs for personal extension, suggested the need "to be hearing new things - articles to read and guest speakers, eg Joan Dalton, Stephen Covey, Tony Ran, Steve Biddulph, and education advisers." She noted that the network supported her as a learner via "learning from each other. HOWEVER, we tend to do this informally anyway - this is why I'd like MORE!"

Our critical friend was impressed by the professionalism, energy and synergy of the group’s dialogue in its final meeting for the year: "Building trust over the year cultivates the learning environment for teachers with each other. today people felt comfortable celebrating their successes and outstanding teaching and learning practices. The power of the group was almost tangible this afternoon. Certainly this energy should be a powerful positive voice for effective learning and teaching in the school, if it is not already; or conversely its energy should continue to be nourished and shielded from the more negative sectors of the professional body in the environment."

In her analysis of the meeting’s dynamics and content, our critical friend was able to identify a range of aspects of the professional dialogue within the group. She commented on the group members’ ability to understand and apply the ideas of the shared knowledge base of First Steps. A lower school teaching pair demonstrated their effective learning and teaching knowledge, and their ability to operationalise it. They shared some outstanding teaching strategies. The LOTE teacher offered "a whole new dimension on how to practically move specialist teachers to the multi-age framework of thinking, that is understanding the learner and engaging students in construction of meaning", while the Learning Support Teacher focussed on different learning styles and the need to try different approaches when something isn’t working.

Our critical friend pointed to various members’ obvious feeling of welcome and involvement. She was impressed by the risk-taking, the sharing of ideas, and the personal responsibility for own learning. She noted that while I "continued to encourage, acknowledge and support. No longer were interactions going through the chair (the principal). Members were bouncing ideas off each other, questioning and seeking the learnings and information they were after."

Issues raised for further discussion and trial in teachers’ classrooms next year include:

- refinement/development of integrated studies
- use of learning centres and contracts
- use of space for group learning
- planning for multiple intelligences and learning styles
- effective use of technology.
1.6.4 The Role of The Principal in Fostering Professional Learning and Inquiry Through a Change Process

As indicated repeatedly in the research (eg Fullan, 1993; Hargreaves, 1994), the role of the principal is important in creating conditions which are enabling and empowering to teachers involved in educational change. A number of themes emerged from teachers’ responses in relation to the principal’s support role:

- being there for teachers - "being willing to listen and advise; continue to back up my judgement and to listen to my concerns", "support, encouragement and enthusiasm of the principal"
- providing resource support - classroom resources; organisation of resources
- creating blocks of Non Contact Time to allow discussion between teachers about assessment, evaluation, resources, teaching/learning strategies
- supporting classroom teachers’ in challenging specialist teachers’ notions of graded curriculum
- selection of children for classes
- providing opportunities for professional development - visits to other schools, workshops, professional reading
- supporting and co-ordinating network meetings

These ideas are in alignment with concepts found in the research literature, for example leaders as learners and reflective practitioners (Duignan, 1987), the changing role of the principal from manager to facilitator with a key role in change, teamwork and improvement (Walker, 1994), cultural leadership which creates contexts to enable members of the organisation to move together towards shared goals (Crump, 1993:65; Duignan, 1987; Fullan and Hargreaves, 1991) and ethical leadership focusing on teaching and learning (Sergiovanni, 1987).

Perhaps one of the strengths of this process has been educative - challenging others to participate in the visionary activity of identifying what is worthwhile, what is worth doing and preferred ways of doing and acting (Duignan, 1987). From my perspective, part of my role through this network has been that of motivating others to actively invest themselves and become self-managing, engaged participants (Evans, 1993). Evans (1993) and Sergiovanni (1987) claim the primary task of managing change is not technical, but motivational. Leadership behaviours include inspiring, pushing, modelling, advocating, confronting, acknowledging, encouraging, rewarding, respecting and listening. Teachers in this group have certainly indicated that they see the leadership role in this light.

One interesting response highlights the leader’s role as one who "commits people to action, ... converts followers into leaders, and may convert leaders into agents of change" (Bennis and Nanus, 1985:3; cited in Fullan, 1993). Her closing comment on the end-of-year survey was "I feel we jumped a bit quick, and it was sink or swim for a while. Issues like camps, maths resources and reading materials, Year level lessons (LOTE, Music) require thoughtful
planning and student placement will be an arduous task for 1998. having said that, we all seem to have coped with our own changes fairly well, so maybe ‘doing’ is a better way of changing that ‘talking’.

The structural changes implied in this statement are necessary to support cultural change. This is certainly in accordance with Kotter’s (1995) ideas about the importance of empowering others to act on the vision. Effective leaders, according to Kotter, devise processes for getting rid of obstacles to change; encourage risk-taking and non-traditional ideas, activities and actions by emboldening people to try new approaches, to develop new ideas and to provide leadership - the more people involved, the better the outcome; and, articulate the connections between the new behaviours - rooted in social norms and shared values - and organisational success.

Teachers' comments also reflect their agreement with Walker (1994) who proposes that the principal working in a collaborative team environment supports teaching rather than controlling it. "Collegiality, not hierarchy, ... is what drives the school." (Walker, 1994) The leader’s role changes from transactional to transformational, with consultation, open, democratic decision-making and internal support key functions, and the focus on facilitating others' talents, knowledge and expertise.

During this action-research process I have certainly been a co-learner. In fostering our individual and group learning I have consciously used collaboration rather than hierarchy. This learning process has involved starting with a small group, building support networks and trust, professional development, reflection on practice with colleagues, debate, and shared leadership - based on listening, open communication lines, and movement out of comfort zones (Marshall, 1995). While others have acknowledged their learning throughout the implementation of this innovation, I also have had the opportunity to critically reflect, to become more comfortable with uncertainty, and to examine habitual windows on the world (Eckert, 1996). Throughout this project I have become increasingly aware of the importance of my change agent role for school improvement and the need to facilitate collaboration, problem-solving, and experimentation in change processes, keeping the key focus of improving teaching and learning foremost (Sergiovanni, 1987).

My own perceptions, supported by the reflections of our critical friend, suggest that my role as leader has been to generate: positive organisational learning (Crump, 1993), a creative educational climate (Walker, 1987;1987a; cited in Crump, 1993:83), and a preferred future with a focus on student learning (Ashenden and Milligan, 1993). I feel privileged to have worked with this group of teachers in creating a very professional culture (Tesche, 1995). In this process I am reminded of the ideas of who Kofman and Senge (1993) also view organisational and individual learning as the only way that organisations can thrive in a world of increasing interdependency and change by:

- critically reviewing how we learn and act together with a sense of shared purpose
- transformational learning, requiring individual learning and cultural change
• the support, insight, and fellowship of a community learning meaningful things
• developing the capacity to build on lived experience, learning from new challenges, and together creating improved performance.

A learning culture allows people to find security "in the dynamic equilibrium between holding on and letting go" - rather than in security - , so that current knowledge takes second place to what can be learnt (Kofman and Senge, 1993:17). In practical, school-related, terms MacNeill and Silcox (1996) note four main characteristics of a learning organisation:

• the facilitation and promotion of learning at all levels;
• the transformation of organisational and individual practice;
• continual organisational and individual improvement;
• the adaptation to and leading of change.

Cooper and Boyd (1995) have remodelled the notion of the learning organisation, taking its basic principles and applying them specifically to the school context. The concept of an organisation focused on improvement, even transformation, via continual learning and collegial relationships remains fundamental. The basic purpose for schools must be to help students learn how to learn and to love learning. For such outcomes to occur, teachers need to change from inspectors and caretakers, to facilitators; from tellers to facilitators of social learning contexts that promote exploration, resource gathering/processing/synthesising/sharing, discovering and questioning. Cooper and Henderson (1995:10) refer to this as developing "a collaborative learning community". The research undertaken indicates such a collaborative learning community orientation is developing.

1.7 The Future

1.7.1 The Multi-age Network

The majority of participant teachers have expressed a desire for our multi-age team to continue next year. All involved this year will again be working in a multi-age class. While the need for collegial support was vital in the first year, next year further support will be important for the refinement of teachers’ approaches. Our critical friend sees our future directions in terms of

"Continuing, building, adding to the groundwork. Not reinventing the wheel regarding teaching ideas and resources. More shared celebrations? Monitoring of input to the group - whole school based agendas? Individual development plans?"
Certainly the ideas of teachers to invite guest speakers, teachers from other schools, and to focus on specific issues are valuable. With the support of our Teachers-in-Residence next year, Joan Dalton and David Anderson from Hands-On Consultancy, we will have access to two outstanding educators for further ideas and celebration.

1.7.2 Teacher Teams

We are also looking forward to the extension of this network concept in 1998, with the introduction of lower (P-3), middle (Years 4-5) and upper (Years 6-7) school Teacher Teams. We will be restructuring from whole school Committees to teacher teams which have responsibility for behaviour management, resources and Key Learning Areas across Year levels. I anticipate that similar issues - resources and resource management, classroom management, effective learning and teaching practices and strategies, implementation of curriculum - will be discussed at these fortnightly meetings, and that each team of 5 to 8 teachers will develop as cohesive, professionally supportive and challenging collegial groups.

1.8 Conclusion

1.8.1 General Comments

During 1997 our multi-age network has developed as a community of learners. Feedback from group members suggest that the conditions, described by Blackmore (1996:20) in her synthesis of the research on educational change, of teachers being able to feel "a sense of professional identity through recognition of their expertise, a capacity to use discretionary judgement and ... their ownership of change." have been created amongst those in the multi-age network. Teachers feel comfortable enough together to challenge and question each other. There is increasing professional dialogue, with the goal of improving student learning outcomes a key focus. Participants believe that this model for professional learning, growth and support has been successful.

Our next challenge is to replicate the model across all sectors of the teaching staff. The measure of our success will be whether, at the end of 1998, these teacher teams feel a similar sense of belonging, support and professional learning., and whether they are engaging in "frequent, continuous and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practice ... (and) design, research and evaluate teaching material together" (Little and McLaughlin, 1993).
1.8.2 Links to the Leading Schools Program

In concluding I would like to link this case study to the Queensland school-based management context. This year Taabinga was selected as one of 104 "Leading Schools". The Leading Schools program aims to improve student learning outcomes via greater decision-making and accountability at the school level. Education Queensland’s agenda is one of major cultural change in schools to achieve the given outcomes. For such cultural change to occur there is "a need to impart to teachers a sense of professional identity through recognition of their expertise, a capacity to use discretionary judgement, and which is premised upon their ownership of change" (Blackmore, 1996:20). If we are not successful in this, we may find that our system’s approach to school-based management has similar shortcomings to those experienced interstate and oversees. Blackmore (1996:23) warns that "While devolution is seen to be an efficient administrative solution to wider political, social and economic problems, its effect in the form of self-managing schools is to construct new sets of relationships in schools which are often antithetical to long held values in public education."

At our school we are using the Four Phase Strategy for Implementing School based management developed by Frank Crowther (1997) as a framework. Our goal is authentic pedagogy, via a process of realigning our structural foundations, building a cohesive professional community and creating new infrastructural design. Some elements of this process are evident in the work undertaken through the multi-age project this year. As our teachers learn and grow together, we aim to make learning for our students authentic: more meaningful, valuable, intrinsically motivating, learner-owned, fun and connected to the real world (Newmann, 1992).

Our multi-age network is focussed on authentic pedagogy via teacher and student learning. Our shared vision and purpose "Learning for life. Learning together ... for a better future" reflects this commitment.
REFERENCES


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