

KIRWAN BUILDING SUCCESS PROJECT: A STRATEGIC INITIATIVE OF EDUCATION QUEENSLAND

By

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Building Success was an action research project aimed at cultivating school based professional development to improve practice by developing authentic and innovative pedagogy in order to address the needs of students with high behavioural support needs.

The major objectives of the project were:

- to develop a school based project that addressed the needs of 'at risk' year nine students
- to develop innovative school based professional development to improve teaching practice by developing negotiated authentic and innovative pedagogy
- to provide educational pathways for these students that would help them gain a vision for the future by developing an understanding of the world of work and training

Background to the issues

The Australian Education Review Committee (1991) proposed that by 1995 almost all students should stay on to Year 12. Research has shown that people who have completed

year 12 have higher levels of employment, higher average salaries, lower levels unemployment, lower levels of incarceration in prisons, and better health (Education Queensland 2010).

In 1993 almost one third of Queensland students dropped out before the end of year 12 (Beresford, 1993. p16). During the period 1992-1997 state schools' retention rate dropped to 69.7% (Education Queensland 2010). This figure has fluctuated during that time with the highest being 85% in 1992, due to the youth labour market collapse. Slee (1995) discusses 'crisis displacement' which includes the role of schooling in deflecting from the issue of youth labour crisis. Retention rates are also increasing due to the Commonwealth Youth Allowance which states that people under age of 18 must be involved in some training if not employed. Many of the students returning to school as a result of this are in need of assistance with numeracy, literacy, counselling and vocational education (2010 p3). This means that classrooms are full of students who do not want to be there, but have nowhere else to go (Slee, 1995. p.4). The change in clientele makes it essential for schools to address the needs of these students.

Queensland schools currently have a high drop out rate. "Completion" is now a major issue for state schools.

Queensland lags far behind the leading OECD countries and the gap is widening. In 1998, 68 per cent of the age cohort completed Year 12. The leading quartile of OECD countries all achieved 85 percent or better, and all have positive educational, social and economic policies in place to improve that figure. (Education Queensland 2010, p. 5).

Thus schools are set the target that, "By 2010, the proportion of young persons in Queensland completing Year 12 in school or equivalent qualifications should match that projected for leading OECD countries" (p. 5).

Cultural diversity, poverty, changes in family structure impact our students. Luke attributes the changing clientele to issues related to the new poverty, changing demographics and economics (Luke, 1999). As schools' clientele changes, curriculum change is necessary to address the needs of this group. While there has been wide ranging curriculum change at some levels, this has not addressed the needs of all students. 'The public education system must also cater for young people who do not fit readily into school environments, for example, children with high behavioral support needs.' (Education Queensland 2010)

The changing nature of students and society indicate that schools need to catch up and change their practices. Students are no longer willing to blindly accept what teachers tell them. They now question authority and rebel if they are not getting their needs met. Schools actually teach them to do this. We regularly ask them to question society and to become independent critical thinkers. However, many of us do not like it when they question us and our methods. Schools need to be proactive rather than reactive when it comes to issues of behaviour.

Curriculum reform is necessary for the prevention of early school leaving. Practical orientation is necessary to engage the newest of schools' clients, that is, those forced to stay on at school due to the economic climate.

Where courses and activities are related to employment and the community, and where adolescent interest and social and personal needs are met in conjunction with supportive and secure relationships with adults and peers,

student attendance improves, self esteem is raised and educational, social and personal development occurs. (Brand, 1993 p27)

Luke argues for the need for addressing curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and holistic tasks as opposed to segmented learning. (Luke, 1999)

Curriculum reform is one issue, the other is relationships and building trust with students. "the central aspect of education - the point at which learning takes place- is undoubtedly the relationship between teachers and their students'(Moran, 1999). There are many theories about teacher/student interactions in terms of behaviour and classroom relationships and they all fit roughly along the following continuum:

Teacher focus -----Shared focus -----Student focus

- Teacher focus - teacher decides what is appropriate behaviour and what the consequences will be for inappropriate behaviour
- Shared focus- teacher and students take joint responsibility for deciding what is appropriate behaviour through negotiated rules and consequences.
- Student focus - students take responsibility for managing their own behaviour, for deciding what is appropriate and for deciding consequences.

The most recent theories tend to range from shared to student focus. The philosophy behind those theories is that if you give students more control in their own learning they will often improve their results and behaviour more effectively than if management is forced upon them. Punishment and reward systems have proven ineffective. Students need to be explicitly taught social skills and metacognitive skills so that they can take responsibility for their own learning. In previous times students have been seen as the problem when outcomes are not being met particularly with students with high behavioural support needs. Now, however, it is more common for schools to begin examining their practices.

Many theorists argue that the traditional punishment/reward systems do not work and in some cases even tend to make the problems worse. They argue that these systems are accepted as inevitable. However Balson (1991) argues that they are remnants of an old autocratic system that was based on the principles of 'force, power and fear' and that there is no place for them in our present day democratic society (Balson 1991.p114). These systems establish relationships of superiority and inferiority which go against the principles of equality in democratic society. There is an assumption that one person - the teacher knows what is best - and this shows a lack of respect for the students (Balson, 1991 p114).

Christine Richmond (1994) espouses similar views and argues that punishment does not work. She claims that this should be obvious through the fact that some students are punished regularly and their behaviour does not improve. She argues that, not only does it not improve, it makes things worse by damaging trust and relationships between teacher and student (Richmond, 1994 p59).

One example of where this philosophy is being put into practice is at Marsden Qld. *Marsden Self Evaluation Project* holds the belief that, 'People can not be made to do anything they do not want to do therefore punishment and reward are no part of the system', (Sears 1997 p1). Mark Hamel (1998), a behavioural intervention specialist in Texas, argues that he was taught to control students through reinforcement and found this method frustrating and impossible with a high failure rate (Hamel, 1998 p1). He claims students need to be taught responsible thinking processes and he is not alone in this belief. Many of these types of programs involve cognitive strategies that teach the students ways to get their needs met in appropriate ways.

Synopsis of Concept of *Building Success*:

Building Success began at Kirwan State High School in year 2000. It was designed as an action research project that involved a group of teachers, support staff, students and members of the wider community. It addressed the challenges of developing innovative pedagogies and aimed to improve educational and social outcomes for a group of year nine students with high behavioural support needs. It involved a high level of negotiation with the students at all levels of the project.

The students met the curriculum objectives through a significant reconceptualisation of the curriculum framework of practical projects unrestrained by timetables and walls and an integration of their core subjects - English, Mathematics, Science and Social Science. The curriculum was student centered and the types of projects negotiated with students ranged from an environmental river regeneration project, constructing a video, organising a bush dance, doing community service with the elderly and small children, to individual work placement, power point presentations and organising a school camp. Assessment also was negotiated and alternatives to existing models were investigated. Future pathways were expanded for these students through the engagement in the world of work and education through community links with business, university and TAFE. This included projects that took students into workplaces where they were involved in working with people with expertise in a variety of areas. Technology was also an important element and was embedded and integrated in the projects which gave them the opportunity for real life use of information technology.

Students learnt valuable educational skills in a different context with a different more active and authentic approach that involved problem solving and conflict resolution, communication and networking in a course designed to meet their particular needs. The future world of work was a focus as was education for active and informed citizenship. Partnerships between the school and the community were an integral element in this project. The business community, and various government departments were involved in the implementation and delivery of the project.

The school context

Kirwan State High is a very large (population 2000⁺) school situated in the provincial North Queensland city of Townsville. It has a comprehensive population and a diverse array of curriculum offerings. More than 70 subjects are offered in the senior school, ranging from traditional academic to vocational oriented subjects. The school is developing its distinctive style with an emphasis on three strategic areas: academics, music and the arts and sport. The school has a positive reputation in the community and has maintained its high enrolment, despite other surrounding schools experiencing decline in numbers.

The Administration of the school were readily supportive of this project. "So we developed a team then and we planned and we introduced it to the community. Had a dinner and invited people along. A lot of people worked together to present that to the community". (Terri)

Because I think this problem with behaviour is not just isolated in the school. I think it affects the whole community and the whole community should be involved in coming up with solutions. A lot of these kids, if they're behaving badly in the school, if they're truanting and they're not at school, they're often

doing things they're not supposed to be doing outside the school as well.
(Terri)

It did come at a cost. And I don't just mean financial. We were lucky to get the funding that we got but we needed to make a decision that we were going to create this extra class which meant reducing possibly the resources for another group. But we decided that this was important so we prioritised and both Terri and Richard are outstanding teachers. It meant that by giving them this group, then there were other groups that missed out on having them as teachers. So I suppose it's a matter of once you commit, you maintain that commitment and pull out all stops to support the people. (Deputy Principal)

Student profiles

The students who were involved in this project were year nines who were exhibiting low attendance / participation rates, at risk of not completing their schooling, failing to achieve academically, and students whose parents had agreed to be part of the consultation process.

Year nines were chosen as the target year for this program for two reasons

- they tend to be the year level represented most in the suspension/exclusion numbers at KSHS. This program aimed to reduce the drop out rate for year nines enabling them to develop a vision of future pathways that would encourage them to stay on into the post compulsory years
- there are numerous options available for students from year ten up including work experience, TAFE links, and school based apprenticeships. There are fewer options for year nines mainly due to their age.

Initially the program started out with a short list of 16 students (there were girls and boys) selected from input from Year 8 teachers and a small panel made up of the Behaviour Management teacher, Year 8 Deputy Principal, Terri and Year 8 Coordinator. Participation in the class was voluntary. Three students selected refused to participate. One of these 4 was later expelled and the other two changed schools/moved away and one mainstreamed. Of the remaining 13 who joined the program, 4 were removed after several counselling sessions because they just wouldn't cooperate. One of these 4 was then later expelled. The other three have remained at school in "mainstream classes".

By the start of Semester II the group was made up of 9: 8 boys and 1 girl. In term 4 the girl was reintegrated into more challenging Maths/Science classes. All students studied 3 electives in the "mainstream" school. 90% of these students were boys and approximately 30% were from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students remained in the program until the end.

Research by Education Queensland Behaviour Management unit and ACER (1998) indicates that students with behaviour problems have less success in the present school system than other students. This project attempted to address this inequity. Current data from these sources indicate:

- 5-6% of all students in Queensland schools were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

- 13% of all students represented in School Disciplinary Absences from Queensland schools were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Behaviour Management Unit, Education Queensland)
- 80% of behaviour management time is spent on boys (Martinez, K. 1999)
- In a typical primary school, 90% of all detentions were boys (NSW inquiry into Boys' Education)
- 61% of high school boys and girls said that boys often disrupted classes (ACER)

The students selected for the project exhibited the typical behaviour management problems referred to above.

Building Success - Relating the theory

The *Building Success* program was based on democratic principles with the students having input into decision making at all levels. Negotiating the curriculum, rules and consequences, was a key element of this program. This included the development of operating rules, the consequences and problem solving. Balson argues for the effectiveness of this approach. "When students are involved in formulating consequences they learn the value of maintaining and respecting order" (Balson, M. 1991 p124). The aim was to develop a situation where the values of cooperation, social equity, self discipline, mutual respect and encouragement are accepted. Opportunities were made for students to have continued input through discussions that covered what was working well and what was not working so well, and how these issues could be addressed.

Because the students targeted lacked skills of negotiation and problem solving, they were taught these skills explicitly as well as having a chance to use them and evaluate their effectiveness on a daily basis. Kauffman (1997) argues that the most effective way of approaching anti-social behaviours is to be both proactive and instructive. This includes planning ways to prevent anti-social behaviour and teaching alternatives to this behaviour (Kauffmann, 1997 p348). The program aimed to do both these things. The aim for students is to move back into mainstream classes in year ten. In order to do this effectively they needed to learn skills that will enable them to cope with a variety of incidents that may occur in the classroom.

Expected Outcomes

At the beginning of the project it was hoped that there would be improved retention, participation and engagement of students in education, expanded options and future pathways for students, enhanced use of information technology in real life settings, school based change in teacher practice signified by ongoing learning, enhanced staff morale and professional image through school based learning, networking, systematic reflection sharing best practice and innovation, implementation of productive pedagogies and innovative approaches to assessment, and wider community involvement.

The Approach - Action research

The project involved an action learning set consisting of four people including three teachers, (including a Deputy Principal who was one of the subject teachers), and an outside facilitator from James Cook University. These participants represented an action learning set, and took a holistic and collegial approach to program development for the students. Each action learning set meeting identified particular challenges in moving to the new pedagogical and curriculum framework and suggested solutions to be trialed. These solutions were continually refined and developed to address the initial and emerging needs of the students and staff.

The action learning set met with the outside facilitator initially in term 4 1999 to plan the establishment of the program. It then met each fortnight in the first and second terms of 2000, twice in the third term, and on a 'need to meet' basis in the fourth term. The role of the facilitator was to act as expert on issues such as retention and literacy and action research, and to assist the staff to reflect on *their* actions rather than the students behaviour. The facilitator also provided access to other university experts who visited once a term to assist with the project. At the end of each session the facilitator emailed a summary of the discussion and points for action to each of the participants. She also provided the teachers with articles about similar projects from Australia and the USA. The facilitator also worked with staff to prepare a paper for dissemination.

It was really good to have an outsider there to make us reflect, to make us think about not so much about what the kids were doing and we tended, when we got together, to talk about "this kid's doing this" and how are we going to handle that. But to think more about our own practice. Sue really got us to focus on ourselves, on what we were doing, how we were feeling, and how we were learning through this process. (Terri)

After having this meeting with another of the university staff, I sort of thought, well, maybe we had done things the right way. We will have some crises, you know, and the crises aren't necessarily bad, they are a turning point. . . . Seeing things in a different way as part of the whole action research thing, like a crisis isn't necessarily bad. (Terri)

To assist in the development of this paper each of the teachers was interviewed about their reflections on the project.

Kids and the Curriculum

Creating a 'curriculum of consequence' (McGinty, 1999) was both a challenge and a reward for the teachers involved. This involved teachers creating authentic and complex tasks, explicit teaching of skills, self directed learning, and letting go of previously held notions of authority in order to engage the students in growing up smartly.

A lot of the program was based around meeting the curriculum needs through projects so the students do things that are realistic. When they write a letter, they don't sit in the classroom and write a letter under made up conditions, they write a letter to a real person for the project that they're doing. They can really see that what they're doing is relevant to something when they see an end product. . . . So getting out and doing "hands on" things is still meeting the curriculum requirement because they're still doing all the things that you

would do in a classroom, in a way, but you're doing them in a different way. It's important to see that there isn't just one way of teaching things, that the curriculum objectives can be met through a variety of approaches and I think that's important. (Terri)

I wanted them to experience relevant and meaningful real life experiences, but at the same time, be it educative, so one of the major things I did after initially which was getting to know them and working out their level of literacy and their life experiences and what they thought about themselves. That was a tough time in the forming --- stage of any kind of group but we got through that and what we planned was a Year 9 Bush Dance. There were some kids who still needed a push along because they still weren't really used to being self-directed learners. (Louise)

I learnt some things about how they need to be taught explicitly about, for instance, we'll let them negotiate, we'll do a lot of negotiation and that's fine, I still value that, but these kids don't know how to negotiate. There were some restrictions, but I don't necessarily see them as being problems. For instance, the whole negotiating thing, being able to show the kids that they have to fit within the community as well as in this project, it's a very important life skill. We all live within communities that have rules and they have to learn about those things. So using that was very valuable. . . . And I find that that's one thing that really the whole accountability thing is really on my mind. With a lot of practical things, it's hard to stick it in a folio. So that's what's been a deep concern to me. But in a junior school it's probably not that, you know, you probably can do a lot more, you have a lot more flexibility than say in a senior school with that sort of thing. (Terri)

You've got a 40 minute lesson, what can you do. You can't really take them out of the school and get them back. The beauty of this is I had them for nearly all of Tuesday and we could go out and do something. So the timetabling is really difficult but important. (Terri)

I continued in the same vein that I had begun when I was an art teacher. We almost called it the *studio model* where you provided the information initially and you guided the students but then you just stood back and they became self-directed learners. (Louise)

It was different in that we had no benchmark to come with the new program. We didn't know what to define as a success. Unlike any other classes we had no marks that we could use. In the other class the kids are doing an exam, you know what you're aiming for. It was interesting that we could start materials from scratch and we could decide what approach that we wanted. I decided in Science, from long experience, that it's no point doing a unit as in the ordinary Science so what I did was I'd done the ordinary units but kept back to about half the normal time and then I asked the kids themselves what they would like to do in the next two weeks as far as it was Science. . . . I've got to do 2 units. I'm going to spend 2 weeks on a unit then you tell me what you want for the next 2 weeks and then after that we'll finish the last unit and then you tell me what you want again and providing there's some funds (you do need a bit of funding for it). . . . I've learnt that activities that they like are ones that don't need instructions from anybody. (Richard)

I think it's absolutely important that they do as much of the normal school work as possible. Yes. I mean the new part of it is that I don't regard these as low level. They're not. Most of them could pass ordinary exams. A lot of these kids when they come to a crossroads and make the right or wrong decision, quite often they're wrong because they're emotionally worked up. I found curriculum design important because as soon as I said to myself "What is it they want out of life?" that's when I started to make the contact. I would say take time out for them to write down two things - the jobs that they're interested in and their hobbies. Obviously if you can bring those in and if you can teach them a new range of skills, and if you can nominate activities for say two weeks each term that are their choice, then their empowered as well and you've got all you need over them. But I say again I've taught difficult kids for 15 years now and I've learned one thing - they grow up! You think you've achieved something and during that time all they've done is grow up.
(Richard)

Relationships with Students

The notion of giving students a lot of respect (and demanding it in return) is emotionally draining for teachers. "The old thing that students are individuals and have to be treated as individuals, those sorts of things that we've known all the time, is very difficult to implement. It's taken a lot of working through to develop that sort of trust that what they said really would count. I think a lot of it was that we asked them to negotiate the rules at the beginning of the year but there's still a bottom line, like are we really going to negotiate for them? . . . Also, there are some things that aren't negotiable. I had to teach them that there is a difference, there are some things we can negotiate, and there are some things that we can't." (Terri)

At the start I really had to work because they saw me as a "Deputy" and I guess I wanted to show them that I was a teacher as well, and a person, so we did a lot of activities that involved each of us equally, sharing bits about our personal selves. I was very friendly with them. That seemed to really make a difference, so then I could just really relate to them on a very friendly basis but it was still business-like. They are probably going to utilise the relationships that they established between Richard and Terri and me as supports. (Deputy Principal)

Any program like this you have to get to know the kids, you have to know the group dynamics. I've had to take a shit load of crap over the years. . . . I have to accept the fact that I'm going to be called a bastard. . . . But, if you talk to them, they've all got an amazing number of interests outside the school. . . . But the main thing is that some of these kids just want somebody to talk to. (Richard)

Behaviour Management

I'd been teaching some low stream grade 9 English classes - it seemed to me that a lot of the kids weren't in there because they had learning difficulties - they were in those classes because they had behavioural difficulties. So I thought that that probably needed to be addressed. The students that are targeted in "Building Success" didn't necessarily have learning difficulties, but they weren't achieving their best because of some of their behaviour. We sat down and set out really strict rules at the beginning; it just didn't work with these sorts of kids. But they got to a point where they wanted more rules and it worked out a lot better.

I think when you say something you have to be consistent. Like if you say to them, "Okay, we're going to talk about this, we're going to negotiate this", and if they say they want to do

something, then you really have to be able to act. Of course, you really have to be able to set boundaries so that they know that if I say something ridiculous that we couldn't possibly do, well then, yeh, just the fact that they were being listened to and they started to think then, "Oh, okay then what I do say is being taken seriously". (Terri)

Once they got a feel of the freedom that this created through this different approach, they of course latched on to it and tried to see how far this freedom went and when it went too far we had to pull in boundaries again. I think the whole aim of what we were trying to do is to make these kids fit into the community, because at the end of the day, that's what they're going to have to do. (Deputy Principal)

It's a good idea to have something they can handle without you stressing out and yelling at them all the time. That also then gives you a chance to go around and just talk to them in a friendly way rather than a supervisory way. (Richard)

Successes, Learnings and the Future

We have achieved. Some people look at the success of the program and say these kids are still mucking around - it hasn't worked. We didn't set out to fix the kids, we set out to teach them something and I think we have. By addressing the curriculum in a different way I think we have actually taught them quite a lot.

They've done a lot of projects and they have learned things through those projects. . . . I think a lot of them have achieved, have improved their results from last year. That doesn't necessarily mean that they're getting brilliant marks, I mean some of them are still failing, but they've gone from a Very Limited to almost passing. And they have actually learnt something in some subjects. They've all passed at least one or two subjects, whereas some of them were failing everything last year. So they have definitely improved their academic results. . . . They've learnt a lot of social skills. So I think that's really important for them. And they've learnt things about the real world, like one kid got sent back from TAFE the other day because they had the wrong pants on. Now, they're told that sort of stuff at school all the time, but they don't see the real side of it. That sort of acted really quickly to show him that all the things we say at school are the same things that they're going to say to you in the workplace. . . . I think that sort of attitudinal change is huge for some of those kids. . . . I've learnt about my relationship with students and looking at the curriculum in different ways and even in mainstream classes you can take a lot of that with you. So you look at different ways of approaching the curriculum. (Terri)

I think we've helped rekindle their love of learning. Many of the other students I truly think they would have just been suspended, suspended, suspended because they were just naughty, really naughty before they came to us and they would've ended up not being in a school anymore and I don't know what would have happened after that. (Louise)

The biggest learning in these kids is to give to my mind is to let them feel that they're part of the program and that they have a say in their education. (Richard)

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