

Building Knowledge, Building Professionalism: The Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools and Teacher Professionalism

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the rationale and processes used to form the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools under the auspices of the Centre for Practitioner Research at the University of Sydney. It argues, in particular, that the processes are distinctive in that they do not arise from formal partnership agreements, nor from funding arrangements, but are based upon goodwill and a genuine attempt to form an interactive community of practice. The paper both reports upon the progress of the formation of the coalition and the ways in which it can be said to be contributing to notions of activist teacher professionalism.

Introduction

A question which has been exercising the minds of educational practitioners, whether in schools, in universities, or in policy forming organisations, has been "What is The Knowledge base for the Teaching Profession: What Would it Look Like and How Can We Get One?" (Hiebert, Gallimore & Stigler, 2002). In their review of the salient research in education Hiebert *et al* argue that in order for the knowledge formed by practitioners in the field to become more broadly based professional knowledge it must move from being local to becoming public, storable, shareable and verifiable. These understandings are not new, they are to be found in the work of Stenhouse (1984) and those many advocates of practitioner enquiry as the basis for teaching (Elliott, 1998) including, in the UK, government agencies (Cordingley 2000).

Knowledge about what happens in schools for (David) Hargreaves, rests on evidence (1999a), albeit a particular kind of evidence generally derived from a model which seeks for irrefutable proof. Hargreaves has not been without his critics. Elliott (1999) believes that the knowledge formation of which Hargreaves writes is founded on a positivistic view of evidence in that his accounts of useful and worthwhile educational research are based upon *aquasi-causal mechanism* (p. 7). Elliott goes on to argue that Hargreaves has given a questionable status to what may be called *indubitable knowledge*; generally knowledge acquired through the experimental method, characterised by treatment and control groups

and largely prevalent in such fields of practice as medicine and agriculture. Nonetheless he concedes that the concept of evidence as the basis for practice is a worthwhile ambition, if the effect is seen as producing evidence that is *actionable* by teachers.

How then do we best understand the notion of evidence based practice and the ways in which it contributes to the knowledge building school and practitioner enquiry; and how might it be understood in the context of the formation of the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools?

Davies (1999) suggests that evidence based practice in education operates in two ways. The first is to *utilise* evidence from world wide research and literature on education; something which is not routinely done in schools. The second is to *establish* sound evidence, by carefully collecting information about particular phenomena. Schools in the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools do both. They engage in a research effort which gathers local information, but also includes seeking and evaluating information and theories of practice from a wide variety of sources. Also, as we shall indicate at a later point in this paper, these schools are now collectively moving towards constructing knowledge, from evidence, which may be of use to others in the wider community.

A further issue raised by Davies is to query not only what counts as evidence, but also to consider the question evidence about 'what'? One might be interested, for example, in considering the consequences which result from changing an approach to pedagogy or introducing new technologies. Or, a school might want to investigate the kinds of meanings students and their teachers and parents attach to the concept of what constitutes engaged learning in non-school settings. In each case they will need to ask themselves 'what counts as valid evidence in relation to the question being posed?'

We believe that we can think of the purposes for gathering evidence in three ways. The first of these is to use the evidence in adversarial settings where it is utilised to prove a case. Those seeking for that elusive, indeed we would argue impossible, goal 'best practice' would wish to prove that one method is indisputably better than another. Thus, in medicine, using randomised control trials, there are those that seek for the 'best treatment' irrespective of the multitude of variables within any medical condition. Similarly education has been beset by the 'best practice' holy grail; as if it is possible to identify one best way, for example, to teach reading, or counter bullying in schools, or induct new and beginning teachers in isolated schools.

The second purpose for gathering evidence is to conceive of it within a discourse of forensic science, where the investigator is seeking above all else to understand a particular phenomenon. Knowledge building organisations clearly wish to achieve a deep understanding of that which happens within them: teaching and learning; managing human and material resources; communication and participation; and so on. Of course, this does not mean that practitioner enquiry should not concern itself with the quality of evidence, but rather the purposes to which that evidence is to be put. Norris & Robinson (2001) quite properly point out that a distinction should be made between weak and strong evidence.

There is a third conceptualisation of evidence which has been largely unexplored in the context of practitioner enquiry. This is the notion of re-examining and re-interpreting evidence as an historian would. Evidence from past events can be re-thought and re-told in the light of new knowledge. For example, Davis (2001) developed an argument that late nineteenth century policies with respect to famines in the Indian subcontinent, Africa and China, were based upon precepts which argued that the indigenous people were indolent and unsatisfactory land managers and did not deserve support because they brought about the famines themselves. By re-examining the data on climate through an understanding of EI

Nino he has argued that the policies were morally unsustainable. Knowledge building organisations need to not only think about present events, but also to reflect on the organisation's past history and how this affects and influences what is happening today.

The Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools operates within these latter two conceptualisations; member schools gather evidence which will support them in improving practice and they acknowledge their institutions' social histories and the ways in which these have influenced and affected decisions in the past.

The Nature of the Knowledge Building School

How, then, do schools, as learning communities, acquire knowledge which will assist them in the improvement of practice in relation to pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, school organisation, leadership and management. As Hiebert et al (2002) indicate there is growing agreement that professional development leading to improvement in student learning is best achieved when, among other things, it is long-term, school-based and collaborative and founded upon principles of systematic enquiry. Furthermore, it is believed that central to purposeful professional development is the notion of teachers being recognised, themselves, as learners (Darling Hammond & Sykes, 1999, Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, DfEE 2001).

For many knowledge is tacit and seen merely as common sense which well may be based upon untested assumptions. For these schools, improvements which may come about, are more likely to be the result of good luck rather than good management. For some schools the process is one of identifying legitimated knowledge, through publications, conferences, professional associations, academic sources and the like. Finally, for a small number of schools, knowledge is acquired both through these public sources and through local knowledge, constructed by the school itself, in recognition of particular contextual features. It is with schools such as those in third category that this paper now concerns itself.

The notion of the school as a knowledge building organisation, founded upon evidence based practice, has now been widely discussed (Hargreaves, 1999b; Groundwater-Smith & Hunter, 2000). Practitioner enquiry, in this context, moves beyond the individual to the collective and sees as its objective that the whole school can be engaged in systematic enquiry as a normal part of its practice and a means of contributing to school improvement. The norms of individuality and privacy are transcended by norms of collaboration and collective deliberation.

The knowledge creating school, according to Hargreaves (1999b), is likely to be one in which the following factors and conditions, *inter-alia*, prevail:

- a culture of, and an enthusiasm for, continual improvement;
- a strong awareness of the external environment;
- high sensitivity to the preferences of key stakeholders
- coherent, but flexible planning
- recognition of expert knowledge held by teachers;
- professional knowledge creation as a whole school process;
- a readiness to innovate, treating mistakes as opportunities for learning (pp. 126 - 127)

Professional knowledge creation, from Hargreaves' perspective, is knowledge which is derived from the systematic accumulation of evidence. In effect it is developed from systematic forms of practitioner enquiry.

For us, evidence gathered by practitioner enquirers needs to stand a number of tests:

1. *Is it ethical?* This test requires that the evidence is collected with informed consent from all participants in the research enterprise. Thus it does not set out to deceive or to coerce. Furthermore, there is a determination to minimise harm or damage. Of course, it is not possible to claim that noharm will be done simply because there may be unanticipated and harmful consequences.
2. *Has it been triangulated?* The gathering of evidence from only one source, for example, a survey may produce a distorted picture of the phenomenon. It is essential that several data sources are explored and the subsequent results examined and explained.
3. *Has it been intersubjectively verified?* The interpretation of evidence cannot rest only upon one investigator, it is important that it is explored from a number of angles, by a variety of stakeholders.

As well as these basic tests we would also add some further desiderata. We would argue that for the quality of the evidence to meet such standards the enquiry should be allowed sufficient time. A criticism of practitioner research undertaken within the context of a project is that the time frames lead to a 'speeded-up' game of enquiry and action (Heatley & Stronach, 2000, p. 415). Too often the school based practitioners are meeting the needs and deadlines of funding agencies who want to advise policy makers working within highly constrained timeframes. Also, as Ponte (2002) working in a Dutch context, points out, teachers need quite a long and continuous period of time to master practitioner enquiry. Not only does it involve them in developing a new skills base, but also in the formation of new and different attitudes to research. This cannot occur overnight. The Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools is, as yet, an embryo organisation; the members have been together for some two years and are still working on their views and attitudes towards the evidence they are collecting and how it might best inform their practice. It is to the formation of the Coalition that we now turn.

Forming the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools

Early in 2001, in Sydney, New South Wales, teachers from a small number of schools, three from the government sector and three independent schools, sat together and discussed the possible formation of a Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools. They saw themselves contributing to the ongoing improvement of the work of their schools through the systematic and public collection and discussion of evidence regarding teaching and learning within the lived life of the school. As we have indicated, they shared a view that evidence was best considered in the forensic rather than adversarial environment; that is to say that it should be constructed and examined in ways which illuminate understanding rather than as a means of proving a particular case.

The participants in the discussion saw themselves having as their purposes:

- developing and enhancing the notion of evidence based practice;
- developing an interactive community of practice using appropriate technologies;
- making a contribution to a broader professional knowledge base with respect to educational practice;

- building research capability within their own and each other's schools by engaging both teachers and students in the research processes; and
- sharing methodologies which are appropriate to practitioner enquiry as a means of transforming teacher professional learning.

The processes which they wished to adopt were:

- developing new practitioner research methods;
- sharing methodologies which are appropriate to practitioner enquiry;
- engaging in cross researching in member schools;
- considering forms of documentation;
- reporting and critiquing research;
- engaging in collaborative writing and reflection;
- planning professional development to support practitioner research; and,
- considering ethics in practitioner research.

Since its inception a number of schools have indicated an interest in joining. A fourth government school is now a member. The group meets four times per year with different schools presenting brief research papers to their colleagues. A web based Authorised Users' Community has been established where further discussions can take place; although this resource has been rarely used. In a number of cases school based practitioners have also presented conference papers and written journal articles which are a tangible demonstration of their achievements. (Groundwater-Smith & Hayes, 2001; Groundwater-Smith & Corrigan, 2002; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2002)

The embryo coalition believes that by embedding enquiry practices into the daily work of the schools it is possible to evolve an authentic workplace learning culture. They recognise that professional learning is not an exclusively individualistic enterprise but that learning and growth can take place at the organisational, or corporate level. The notable feature regarding this work is not only the detail of what was done and the ways in which it was accomplished, but also the ways in which it enables the teachers to reflect together. Much of the work on teacher thinking has focused upon reflection as an individual act, rather than one which is a collegial communicative exercise.

The formation of the Coalition has been a dialogic exercise which has engaged the school based practitioners with each other and with critical friends in the academic community. Kemmis (2000) speaks of connecting the lifeworlds of educational research. Academic researchers and practitioner researchers operate in different realms with different mores and rewards; some have characterised these as parallel universes. Nonetheless, the problems and processes on one side are interconnected with problems and processes on the other. Real dialogue between the two can contribute to a more inclusive critique of educational practices as well as informed, well judged actions.

Ebbutt (2002) makes a distinction between school engaged in: (1) no culture of research, (2) emergent research culture; (3) established research culture and (4) established-embedded research culture. Of the seven schools now in the Coalition, two would be in the second category, three in the third and two in the fourth. This mix makes for very generative interaction between the schools as they share and discuss their various enquiries.

What is of particular note is that the Coalition did not form in response to external initiatives such as a funded program or university partnership, but because the schools themselves had an expressed desire to work in a particular way. Having said that it was also critical that the Centre for Practitioner Research, situated at the University of Sydney was able to and

indeed desirous of, supporting the Coalition and providing it with some sort of institutional base.

McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins (2002) have argued that there are six models of School-University partnerships, these being:

- School Bound - individual teachers mentored by university 'research experts';
- School Wide - supported by university facilitator/critical friend;
- University Led - University as 'expert bringer' of research to the school (s);
- Across Schools - individual teachers across schools mentored by university 'research experts';
- Across and Between Schools - supported by university facilitator/critical friend; and
- Across and Between Institutions - all partners are experts, facilitators and critical friends to each other (pp. 16 - 19)

We would argue that the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools falls into the sixth category where professional learning becomes available to all participants.

Making a Wider Contribution

What is now emerging from the Coalition is its enthusiasm to make a wider contribution to the knowledge of others. Currently it is exploring the possibility of working with the Australian Museum to look at ways in which students learn when they use the museum as a facility. The schools feel that they will both enhance their own corporate learning and that of the Museum also. As well, the Coalition has been approached to take part in an international study examining what it is to grow up in a specific city, time and place.

The Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools as an Emerging Community of Practice

As noted above, the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools was established not in response to any external initiatives but rather to a desire within member schools to work in a particular way and the recognition of similarities between a number of schools in terms of the prevalence of a culture of inquiry and professional learning and a tendency toward the use of teacher inquiry as a tool for professional development.

Over the past two years, the Coalition has emerged as what might be termed, to draw on Wenger's (1998) notion, a 'community of practice', where members of individual school communities can also claim membership of the broader Coalition community. Within Wenger's model, communities of practice evolve from how professionals work together to develop shared meaning through the exercise of joint enterprise, shared repertoire and mutual engagement (see Figure 1), which in turn impacts on the development and evolution of identity.

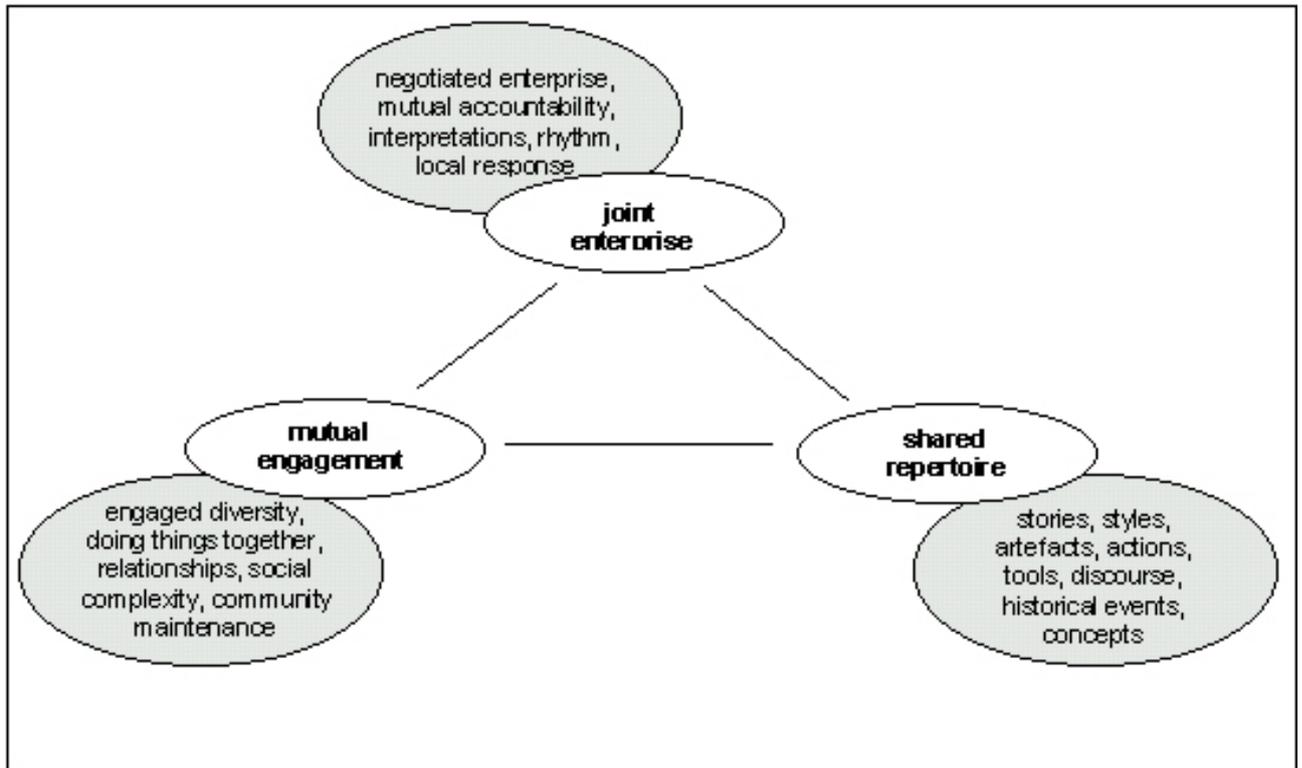


Figure 1: Dimensions of Practice as the Property of a Community (Adapted from Wenger, 1998:73)

The Coalition's member schools have worked to develop these three dimensions of practice through their ongoing sharing of research, research methodologies and artefacts, the establishment of agreed purposes and processes, engagement in cross-school and wider research ventures and the discussion and critique of each others' practices. Within the Coalition, it is hoped that such transformation of identity for the teachers involved will take place with reference not only to their primary community of practice (i.e. their own school community), but also their membership of a broader community. Given the embryonic nature of the Coalition at this point in time, it is fair to say that there is a significant way to go in this journey, but that over the past two years, an excellent foundation has been laid.

Knowledge Building and the Development of Teacher Professional Identity

Knowledge building activities such as those undertaken by Coalition members are situated within an understanding of the emancipatory and democratic possibilities of teacher inquiry and other such activities, an understanding which is reflected in the purposes and processes of the Coalition, where the professional development and renewal of teachers and the associated improvement of student learning outcomes are central. Such an approach values the development of autonomous and 'activist' (Sachs, 2000) professional identities, responding to Stenhouse's challenge to engage with professional judgement and in doing so move towards 'emancipation':

"The essence of emancipation, as I conceive it, is the intellectual, moral and spiritual autonomy which we recognise when we eschew paternalism and the rule of authority and hold ourselves obliged to appeal to judgement. Emancipation rests not merely on the right of a person to exercise intellectual,

moral and spiritual judgement, but upon the passionate belief that the virtue of humanity is diminished in man when judgement is overruled by authority."

Such attitudes are at odds with the approach to evidence based practice within education which sees the search for 'best practice' or 'what works' as the primary task of the enterprise, approaches which, as we mentioned earlier, generally draw on positivistic research paradigms. The way in which Coalition schools treat evidence grows in the first place out of their purpose in undertaking knowledge building activities, and in the second place, out of an approach to evidence and research generally which draws on critical and postmodern research paradigms. This inquiry is predicated upon an understanding of the evidence itself as problematic, where the primary task is to 'make sense' of it while at the same time engaging in professional discourse which is both generative and reflexive. This understanding reflects Jill Blackmore's challenge to achieve more than a focus on 'what works' in practitioner inquiry when she writes:

"Research based practice works through the theory practice dynamic critically, and it is that criticality that is crucial for a knowledge based democracy which takes into account the social and cultural as well as the scientific and technological. It requires researchers to problem set and not just problem solve, to be strategic as well as relevant. It requires from teachers as practitioner researchers another level of professional judgement that derives from the theoretical underpinnings of their disciplinary field of practice."

So in terms of their purposes, while, to use Blackmore's terminology, the Coalition's endeavours are sometimes about problem solving, at the heart of what they do is the problematisation of practice. Through practitioner inquiry, teachers seek to come to a greater understanding of the complexity of their practice, contextualised within the school in which they work, as well as the society within which they live. The development of a level of professional judgement which lives up to Blackmore's challenge, enriched by theory as well as practical experience, is one of the goals of the Coalition's knowledge building endeavours. Contextualising their work within the social and cultural and developing an understanding of teaching as a political activity is another.

Knowledge building activities undertaken within these aspirations have the potential to become a catalyst for the advancement of teacher professionalism and the development of teacher professional identities which have an activist or political intent. The notion of 'activist professionalism' has been defined by Judyth Sachs as that which is "fundamentally political" in its *raison d'être* and which aims to "improve all aspects of the education enterprise at the macro level and student learning outcomes and teachers' status in the eyes of the community at the micro level" (Sachs, 2000:77). Further, "first and foremost an activist professional is concerned to reduce or eliminate exploitation, inequality and oppression. Accordingly the development of this identity is deeply rooted in principles of equity and social justice" (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs 2002:352). Elsewhere, Sachs summarises activist professionalism as that which is:

- Based on democratic principles
- Negotiated
- Collaborative
- Socially critical
- Future oriented
- Strategic and tactical (2002:14-15)

Within member schools, participation in practitioner inquiry and other knowledge-building activities have assisted in elevating teachers' views of their practice far beyond their own classrooms. Sachs (2000:93) claims that "the activist professional creates new spaces for action and debate, and in so doing improves the learning opportunities for all of those who are recipients or providers of education." Such spaces are opening up both within and beyond member schools at the hands of teachers. Collegial conversations predicated upon trust engendered through working together in new ways, exercising professional judgement in a range of contexts and engaging in reflective practice and self study within a collaborative framework are on the rise within the schools. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that for many teachers, practitioner inquiry has been instrumental in prompting a revisioning of their professional identity through providing transformative moments through the linking of their work to broader educational endeavours and helping to conceptualise themselves and their work in new ways which transcend traditional divides such as subject areas and the age or stage of their students.

To return briefly to Wenger's model, identity for the individual is characterised as a combination of: negotiated experience, community membership, learning trajectory, nexus of multimembership and relation between local and global. He argues that, in his words, "Identity is fundamentally temporal; the work of identity is ongoing; because it is constructed in social texts, the temporality of identity is more complex than a linear notion of time; identities are defined with respect to the interaction of multiple convergent and divergent trajectories" (1998:154). The process of identity formation is construed by Wenger as the 'reconciliation' of multimembership, where the individual comes to an understanding of her/himself through reconciling various roles and identities to the self and each other. In relation to the connection between practice and identity, he argues "developing a practice requires the formation of a community whose members can engage with one another and thus acknowledge each other as participants." (p.149) In Wenger's assessment, identity is mediated by the individual within and among multiple roles, through the process of negotiation and reconciliation.

The Coalition supports the development of activist professionalism within teachers in member schools through providing the framework of a community of practice within which the development of such an identity is an anticipated norm. Teachers involved in the Coalition's work negotiate their own professional identity with reference to their membership of this particular community of practice as well as that of their own school, and in doing so, the aims and purposes of the coalition form part of the terrain within which their identity is formed and reformed.

Conclusion

The Coalition is still in its beginning stages, and although it sometimes feels as though we are fighting against several tides, those of the intensification of teachers' work and the current political tensions between government and non-government schools being two significant ones at present, the advances so far have been significant. The sharing and critique of work across schools has yielded some very invigorating professional discourse, and trust has gradually built up between member schools to the point where in recent times we have begun to move beyond the celebratory to address some of the more difficult issues present within our work. It is our hope that as we move toward working with each other in new ways such as those mentioned above, that our community will become more interactive and networked, that still greater levels of trust will develop, and that we will become a more powerful forum for teachers in terms of building and asserting professional identities which reflect the broader social aims of education.

Author Profiles

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