

The Impact of Change in the Early Years of Schooling on School Based Relationships

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by

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ABSTRACT

Currently in Western Australian schools the early childhood profession is facing profound educational change. Such a change is the 'P1', the combination of pre-primary and year one students in a classroom. The new structures were implemented without consultation with the early childhood professional community. This paper draws on a five-year study that examined the conceptual and behavioural position developed by school staff towards P1. The study revealed that the way in which school staff responded to P1 was complex, multi-faceted and dynamic. Their conduct was 'situated' in their workplace and school-based relationships and although commonalities existed, school staff's response to P1 varied. Decisions about the construction of P1 classes affected how school staff responded to the P1 context. This study found that this change forced school staff to re-examine their own beliefs, re-define their situation, re-construct their realities through interaction, negotiation and compromise. Recommendations from this study include the development of processes to monitor the impact of P1 class structures on school staff, relationships and student learning.

INTRODUCTION

Both internationally and nationally, the last few decades have imposed on schools a succession of unrelenting worldwide educational reforms aimed at improving student learning. Such reforms target facilitative leadership, shared philosophies, united school visions, participative decision-making, collaboration, collegiality and trust amongst school staff (Caldwell & Hayward, 1998; Dimmock, 1990; Fullan, 1991, 1993; Hargreaves, 1995; Knight, Lingard & Porter, 1993; Hoy, Tarter & Witkoskie, 1992; Nelson & Hammerman, 1996; Sellars, 1996; Wallace & Wildy, 1997). The way school staff define changes in their workplace and respond to them are complex, multi-faceted, dynamic and embedded in their relationships with other school staff. The capacity of school staff to enter partnerships, form alliances and reach shared consensus is critical to the change process. Relationships cannot survive in constant conflict and opposing definitions of the situation (Keane, 1996).

Currently, in Western Australian schools the early childhood profession is facing profound educational change, as a result of changes to classroom combinations. One of these is an innovation called 'P1' which involves grouping pre-primary and year one students in the one class. Unlike other composite primary year classes, P1 demands an amalgamation of early childhood and primary curriculum and philosophy. To date, the basis on which P1 curriculum and pedagogy can be built has not yet been explored (Stamopoulos, 2001). Nor has a formal process been articulated for dealing with the ideological differences and beliefs that exist in schools with respect to early childhood and primary education. Through its inception, P1 has created a new arena for the study of contestation between early childhood and primary school stakeholders. This has compelled school staff to re-examine their own beliefs, re-define their situation and re-construct their realities through interaction, negotiation and compromise. To date, no studies have been located that examine the position school staff construct with respect to P1 and its effects on school based relationships. Therefore the stance taken by school staff towards this organizational change will be critical to its success.

THE STUDY

In order to explore these matters further, the study investigated the question: What stance do school staff construct with respect to P1? The term 'stance' here refers to the conceptual and behavioural position developed by school staff. In terms of the symbolic interactionism theoretical framework for the study, stance refers to the participants' definition of the P1 situation and their mode of accommodating that definition. This study is based on a qualitative paradigm of inquiry informed by symbolic interactionism.

The thirty-one participants in this study comprised six principals, fifteen P1 teachers and ten teacher-aides, from three government and three independent Western Australian primary schools. Data came predominantly from interviews, however, further data was collected from classroom observations, informal conversations and document analysis. The six principals held no formal qualifications in early childhood, with one principal holding limited practical experience in a pre-primary class as a principal of a one teacher rural integration program school. Of the ten teachers in the three government schools, nine were primary trained and qualified to teach children from grades one to seven, while one was early childhood trained and qualified to teach children from three to eight years of age. Of the three independent school teachers, two were primary trained and three early childhood trained. Of the ten teacher-aides, seven had completed teacher assistant courses. Two of the teacher-aides were re-deployed cleaners of which one could not speak English.

Following data collection and analysis, the findings were presented to several early childhood curriculum specialists (outside of Western Australia), along with six principals, four teachers and one teacher-aide (practising in Western Australia). This was intended to gain an understanding of how representative the participants were of a broader group (national and local) and to determine whether there was a diversity of opinion and multiple voices within the profession.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data showed that P1, as an employer initiated reform, had compelled principals, teachers and teacher-aides to re-examine their own beliefs, re-define their situation, re-construct their realities through interaction, negotiation and compromise, and construct a stance. Their stance was not static, but rather complex, multi-faceted and dynamic, and embedded in their relationships with other school staff. While commonalities existed, the meaning of P1 differed for staff. Principals, teachers and teacher-aides saw themselves as having differing definitions of the P1 situation and varying degrees of power. The pressures they were subjected to forced them to re-evaluate the way they defined this change and focus on the projected costs and benefits to themselves (self-interest) and others (educational ideology). Their relationship with other school staff impacted on their stance because of the need to work collaboratively. In order to gain an understanding of the impact of P1 on school based relationships, the basis on which staff responded to P1 was examined.

Basis on which school staff respond to change

This study has as its focus the primary school workplace, in particular 'P1' classes. Within this workplace there are two distinct and separate sectors of education: early childhood and primary. Strong solidarity exists amongst members in the early childhood field to support the adoption of developmentally appropriate programs unlike primary that places a stronger emphasis on formal academically orientated programs and curriculum-focused pedagogy. Teachers tended to support groups or institutions in which they were members and this had

a significant impact on their conduct and relationships with other staff (Hargreaves, 1995; Hewitt, 1976; Hewitt & Hewitt, 1986; Scott, 1995; Skidmore, 1975; Wood, 1982).

In most instances, teachers strove to reconceptualise their teaching and reach consensus on how P1 classes would operate. According to Dimmock & O'Donogue (1997) and McGinn (1999) it is not uncommon for school staff who held similar definitions of the situation to alter their stance. This is because social groups and institutions adopt rules and conditions of admission, but these are not static and are often altered by groups or individuals through interaction, negotiation and compromise (Scott, 1995; Skidmore, 1975). However, without training and support, most teachers (especially primary trained teachers) found it difficult integrating early childhood philosophy into their P1 class. In order to reach shared consensus with other P1 teachers, they prioritized the need to form strong working partnerships, which resulted in increased collegiality and bonding between both sectors. For "smooth interaction to occur, it is necessary that all interpret situations in the same way" (Woods, 1996, p. 33).

In many instances, consensus was reached, however difficulties also emerged. First, school staff held different definitions of the situation. Second, they had varying degrees of power. Third, they were subjected to different forces that pressured them to re-evaluate their definitions of the situation and focus on projected costs and benefits to themselves and others. Fourth, change had forced them to re-conceptualise their practice in an attempt to reach shared consensus by forming partnerships with each other.

Different definitions of the situation

Conflicting definitions of the situation are prevalent in school workplaces with various studies showing school staff differ in their willingness to accept and deal with change (Dalín, 1978; Gjerde, 1983; Lovell & Wiles, 1983; Hanson, 1985; Coetsee, 1993, cited by Van der Westhuizen & Theron, 1996; French & Pena, 1997; Hargreaves, 1995; Woods, 1996). Triggered by new reforms, differences in ideology have the potential to impact on staff relationships and influence partnerships despite the most favorable conditions. As Goldstein (1997) reveals, even under optimum US conditions, teachers found it difficult including developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) into primary year levels because of differing ideologies on how young children learn. In Britain, ideological differences emerged in response to school reform. School staff were critical of policy makers who instigated reforms to include young children in classes with older children. They believed the needs of four year olds were non-compatible with the demands of school organisation (Cleave & Brown, 1992). This was also the case in New South Wales, where the early childhood profession faced dilemmas trying to implement change in a school system that was traditional and more likely to retain the status quo (Patterson & Fleet, 1999). As McLaughlin (1993) reveals, "embittered frustrated teachers...existed in professional communities with powerful norms of privacy and unchallenged sacred principles or personal beliefs" (p. 99).

Data from this study found P1 created disharmony and altered school cultures. P1 collaborative teams rather than being harmonious were made up of contrasting beliefs on how young children learn. As a result, ideological differences became a source of resistance in school workplaces. Conflicting teacher attitudes, philosophy and traditional beliefs also impeded on agreed responses to change. Principals found teachers who taught collaboratively often found it difficult to reach consensus on how pre-primary and year one children should be instructed. In various instances, friction emerged between early childhood and primary teachers over the amount of formality considered appropriate for P1 classes with claims of increased 'academic push down'. This impacted on school relationships as teachers negotiated and collaborated with each other. However, in instances where there was no philosophical consensus, indifference, withdrawal or verbal opposition replaced what

was previously a harmonious working environment. Furthermore, not all teachers were comfortable interacting with other P1 teachers. For many years, some had become accustomed to teaching in isolation, therefore they found it difficult adopting a stance that involved negotiation and compromise. In their view, guidance and assistance was needed, especially in dealing with overpowering colleagues. In some teachers' opinions, P1 required compulsory induction and ongoing professional development, especially when teachers were asked to work collaboratively.

Ideological differences in one school produced a rift between lower and upper primary school staff. Ideologically, teachers in the school were unconvinced that the non-compulsory and compulsory years of schooling should be combined. They feared that changes would spread to other year levels and be implemented across the whole primary school. They opposed its philosophy and vertical grouping and the fact that their primary trained colleagues had been transferred to P1 classes without any choice or warning. Furthermore, they felt threatened or undermined by the inclusion of specially recruited teachers. They saw this attention and expertise of P1 teachers as drawing the focus away from their efforts. They believed a "clique" had developed in the lower end of the school that threatened previously harmonious school relationships. As a result, divisions emerged between P1 and the remainder of the school producing rifts in school relationships.

Varying degrees of power

Power relationships linked to opposing definitions of the situation have the potential to become sources of resistance (Ben-Peretz, 1996). This is because schools are not merely places of work but places of authority with inequalities in power (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett, 1982). Power determines who will predominate and who is in a better position to bargain and negotiate (Hewitt, 1976).

Greater power: In this study teachers who were in a permanent position or close to retirement exhibited a more powerful stance than those who were temporary. They actively negotiated with principals on P1 conditions and adopted an oppositional stance when their needs were not met. Teachers in one school for example, were disturbed to discover they had been provided with a teacher-aide who was a re-deployed cleaner and who could not speak English. Considerable training failed to improve the teacher-aide's techniques for working with young children, making it difficult to include her as an active member of the teaching team. In desperation, the teachers approached the principal expressing concern about the teacher-aide's performance. The principal attempted to minimise disruptions by re-directing the primary school teacher-aide to the P1 classes for a limited time. However, teachers remained dissatisfied and it was not until one teacher altered her stance from negotiator to active critic and threatened to go public, that a more amicable solution was reached.

Equal power: Staff who hold individual or collective power equal to that of their opponents are more likely to negotiate and enter into exchange relationships than those in a weaker bargaining position (Hewitt & Hewitt, 1986). Teachers in this study were sometimes willing to negotiate with each other in order to minimize their workload and make the change process more manageable. For example, they shared programs, duplicating them amongst P1 classes. In schools in which there was more than one P1 class, teachers felt more comfortable collectively approaching their principals for assistance rather than asking for help on an individual basis. Despite having equal power, teachers were hesitant to display open opposition. Instead, they adopted a pragmatic stance and responded with a 'minimalist approach' of withdrawal and indifference when their demands were not heeded.

Minimal power: School staff with minimal power and a lower status tended to be more passive and less willing to enter negotiations. Such individuals occupied a weaker bargaining position. Some temporary teachers for example, believed they held minimal power and therefore would be unable to alter the status quo. They withdrew and adopted a minimalist approach to change, rather than conform to specific directives.

Teacher-aides were the only group of school staff to display conformity. Some were dissatisfied with P1 because they spent the majority of their time with pre-primary children. They also disapproved of the way in which P1 classes were constructed and implemented. They were unaware of the expectations of their job, remained conscious of their position and were reluctant to over-step their mark and become too close to teachers. Although P1 encouraged collaboration and team teaching, teacher-aides were convinced role distinctions still needed to be maintained. For these reasons, they were reluctant to adopt positions as negotiators. Instead, they adopted a conformist mode of accommodation, unwilling to negotiate because they held minimal power to alter their situation.

Power determines the point to which school staff respond to change without fear of consequences. It influences their desire to openly negotiate and compromise. In order to minimize problems associated with change and instill harmonious working relationships, change may need to be accompanied by redistributions of existing power. In this way, school staff would be empowered to take on a more active role in the change process.

Pressures and projected costs and benefits

In times of change or crisis, institutions apply pressure on members to remain loyal (Hewitt, 1976; Rodd, 1996; Scott, 1995; Wood, 1982). Take, for example, the stance by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1987, p. 36) when it boldly stated to its members, "The trend toward early academics, for example is antithetical to what we know about how young children learn." Or, Lady Plowden's statement in 1982 to the Preschool Playgroup Association in England, expressing her disapproval of four year olds being admitted into reception classes on the basis of administrative grounds (Bennett & Kell, 1990). In such situations individuals may feel pressured to respond negatively to change if it threatens their perception of 'duty'.

The pressures school staff faced were employer driven, school based and linked to insufficient guidelines, leadership and support. In one school teachers had enjoyed quality support until the trial MAG school assistance was withdrawn. Structuring internal support was unrealistic because some principals and teachers had no knowledge or background in P1, which made the absence of educational leadership a critical issue. Neither did they have an understanding of both element of P1 (pre-primary and year one) that is necessary for translating new theories of learning into effective educational experiences for children. Without guidance they found it difficult to reconceptualize and reinvent the nature of their teaching practice. This forced them to re-evaluate P1 and focus on the projected costs and benefits to themselves and others. Most principals responded with support and sympathy towards teachers and attempted to accommodate their needs.

Teachers defined P1 differently. For some, P1 was not viewed as a threat to their current status. Such teachers were permanent, close to retirement, temporary or so dissatisfied with P1 teaching conditions they preferred to be employed as relief teachers rather than continue in their current role. A few selected to leave their place of employment.

Some teachers defined P1 as difficult to monitor thereby reducing the likelihood of costs and benefits. It contained no compulsory curriculum, guidelines or pre-set outcomes that pre-primary children had to achieve. Pre-primary children did not have to pass class tests or

learn to read and write. It was a "non-compulsory" year of learning, unlike year one that was compulsory. The Student Outcome Statements written for WA children were not binding on the pre-primary year because they were not compulsory. There were no 'P1 experts' who could appraise or evaluate teachers to assess whether P1 was educationally successful. Neither were there educational school leaders who could assess the success or failure of P1 from an informed base.

Most temporary teachers on the other hand, tended to measure P1 in terms of job security. They were not prepared to refuse employment given the prospect of an unwanted transfer to an unknown location.

Teacher-aides responded to P1 with compliance, if not capitulation. They were unwilling to negotiate or bargain because they lacked the appropriate powers to succeed and believed they were not in a position to make demands. They refrained from verbally opposing P1 because they were wary of losing their jobs. They feared that defiance would result in termination. Therefore, they adopted a policy of compliance. They believed their interests would be safeguarded if they complied with the directions of others. Their relationships with others and directives they were given impacted on their response to P1.

Relationship with others

Change forced school staff to re-conceptualise their practice in an attempt to reach shared consensus by forming partnerships with each other. Relationships based on similarity and intimacy are closely tied to power and shared modes of accommodation (Wood, 1982). Individuals are empowered when they share views and philosophies with each other and are more willing to negotiate, collaborate and formulate shared decisions (Blumer, 1969; Wood, 1982).

There were instances in which teachers claimed P1 improved school relationships and encouraged shared consensus of opinion. They believed this was achieved by eliminating the physical and educational barriers that existed since the government take-over of early childhood education in the 1970s. P1 encouraged a closer bonding between early childhood and primary teachers and helped heal the divisions that previously existed between both fields. In one school, teachers negotiated and compromised with each other in order to reduce the program workload and maximise job satisfaction. Different curriculum responsibilities were allocated to different team members. For example, they shared the responsibility of being in charge of Maths, Science, Art or Health for all P1 children. Lessons were developed and duplicated for over one hundred and twenty five children.

However, when trust and intimacy were absent school staff became guarded, displaying a reluctance to communicate their feelings. Suspicion and lack of confidence damaged school relationships. In one school for example, teachers had become so disillusioned with the absence of external support structures, they attempted to take control of their own professional development requirements. However, when they approached their employer for permission to visit a multi-aged group (MAG) school, their requests were refused without explanation. The teachers felt puzzled, suspicious, angry and abandoned. Their own inquiries concluded that teachers in that MAG school were experiencing problems that employers did not want publicised. Employers' response to teachers requests for help damaged their relationship. Subsequently, teachers became critical and suspicious of employers' intentions and angry at their unwillingness to acknowledge the existence of problems. A suspicious workplace environment emerged in which teachers observed cautiously. Distrust had resulted in suspicion, which had deteriorated school relationships. Trust grows in an enduring consensual relationship in which bonding occurs; as such, "trust is earned, not given" (Keane, 1996, p. 30).

Take for example, a group of P1 teachers subjected to various power tactics in the hope that it would induce conformity. When attending teacher network meetings, inservices and conferences colleagues approached them and asked them to justify their inclusion in P1. After a heated discussion P1 teachers failed to convince their critics who were both early childhood and primary trained. Majority opinion had constituted a strong force in the hope of inducing conformity yet damaged relationships previously held between colleagues. As a result, some teachers often avoided informing their colleagues they were part of P1 and passively withdrew because they grew tired of criticism. Relationships dwindled for some teachers as P1 created an image that reduced the professional standing they previously held amongst colleagues. They responded by either defending their involvement in P1 or informing colleagues that their involvement was not through choice but initiated by employers. However, most P1 teachers found that within their schools, their colleagues were compassionate rather than judgmental.

CONCLUSION

The way school staff defined P1 and responded to this change was varied and embedded in their relationships with others. Changes in their workplace compelled them to re-examine their own beliefs, re-define their situation, re-construct their realities through interaction, negotiation and compromise, and construct a stance. While commonalities existed, the meaning school staff placed on P1 differed. This was due to differing definitions of the P1 situation, varying degrees of power, pressures and attempts to reach shared consensus and form partnerships with others.

School staff who adopted a 'consensus model' perspective on employer-initiated reforms, when they defined P1 as compatible with their own philosophical stance and that of their employing organisation. They saw 'them' versus 'us' conflicts as springing from temporary misunderstandings that could be readily removed and replaced with common interests and democratically agreed upon objectives and values. In order to attain this goal, they acknowledged the importance of strong partnerships and rich relationships in facilitating the change process and were willing to compromise.

However, in many instances consensus of opinion was not easily attained leading to growing resentment. When staff are unable to reach consensus of opinion, there is low tolerance for opposing views, which makes consensus of opinion difficult to reach and impedes the change process. Without processes to monitor the impact of P1 on school staff and school-based relationships, there is the likelihood that some school staff will find it difficult to enter partnerships, form alliances and reach shared consensus. Relationships cannot survive in constant conflict and opposing definitions of the situation (Keane, 1996). Through negotiation and interaction, problems are highlighted, solutions sought and harmonious relationships maintained (Rodd, 1994). Carefully monitored interactive processes allow positive conduct and bonding to be maintained and working agreements to be formulated. In order to safeguard the change process, there is a need to monitor P1 class structures.

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