Paper Presented at the AARE Annual
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"Professional Learning that Makes a Difference": Successful  Strategies Implemented by Priority Actions Schools

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# "Professional Learning that Makes a Difference": Successful Strategies Implemented by Priority Actions Schools

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**Abstract**: This paper presents the learnings from the Priority Action Schools Program as expressed through the meta- evaluation *Knowing Makes the Difference.* The Priority Action Schools Program (PASP), a $16 million program jointly supported by the NSW Department of Education and Training and the NSW Teachers Federation, was designed to provide intensive support to 74 primary, central and high schools with concentrations of students from low socio-economic status (SES) communities over the 2003 school year. All schools participating in the program face issues related to low student achievement, behaviour management and attendance as well as serving communities facing significant hardship.

The key tenets of the program were to:

- Build individual and school capacity through:

  - the creation of professional knowledge developed from practitioner research and evaluation processes
  - strengthened planning, implementation and evaluation processes
  - whole school approaches to improved teaching practice
  - mentoring, reflection and professional dialogue.


- Value context based action through:

  - the involvement of the whole school community in identifying issues and potential solutions
  - the provision of support to schools to trial and evaluate local solutions.

- Enhance partnerships with:

  - the PASP team                           - academics/ critical friends
  - other schools/networks                  - other agencies.

To achieve these aims  Priority Action Schools developed individual school plans to: improve student learning outcomes and student engagement in learning; reduce disruptive behaviour and suspensions; and, improve student attendance and retention.

While the schools experience similar needs, they are unique in context and each school's plan and progress reflected its individual and community needs. The focus of the PASP was on schools selecting the most appropriate strategies for their own context and rigorously evaluating their progress throughout the year, assisted by an academic partner or critical friend as well as a member of the PASP support team.

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> The most significant feature of the program is, the insistence that the PASP is a knowledge-based program.  It was designed with inbuilt evaluation, both internal and external that placed an emphasis upon the learnings that the Program would produce: learning about what happened in classrooms and schools as well as what happened in systems as complex and diverse as the New South Wales Department of Education and Training.

## Introduction:

In writing of networked learning communities Jackson (2003) argued that we cannot improve our schools until we collectively know and understand them; that the route to knowing is collaborative enquiry; and the regenerative processes of knowledge creation, knowledge conceptualization, knowledge transfer and knowledge utilization are at the heart of the organisational and professional learning and networking activity (Pp 6 - 7)

In this paper we will argue that the professional learning strategies implemented by Priority Action Schools and reported in "*Knowing Makes the Difference: Learning from the NSW Priority Action Schools Program*"(Groundwater-Smith & Kemmis, 2004) enabled such school improvement. The "route of collaborative enquiry" and the regenerative processes identified by Jackson  lay at the heart of the professional learning of Priority Action Schools Program (PASP) schools.

Clearly teacher professional learning is always incomplete. Grundy & Robison (2004) in reporting upon recent trends in Australian teacher professional development commented:

> Teaching is forever an unfinished profession. Thus, professional development is intrinsic to the vocation of teaching. By its very nature, teaching is never complete, never conquered, always being developed, always changing. Far from signalling some flaw, the centrality of development to the profession of teaching should be viewed as a badge of honour. (p. 146)

Those working in and leading some of Australia's most challenging schools within the state of New South Wales are faced with a relentless set of demands that require of them all of their wit and skill. If teachers' work has generally intensified, as it has (Bunting, 2004, p. 29) then those managing teaching and learning in the schools discussed in this paper are at a critical juncture.  It is essential that they are engaged in productive work place learning for both their own survival and the positive  development of their students.

## Establishing cultures of collaborative enquiry

The Priority Actions Schools Program (PASP), a joint venture between the Department and the NSW Teachers Federation, was designed to trial intensive assistance to 74 PSFP (disadvantaged? Or low SES?) schools serving communities with deep needs.   The trial aimed to build school and individual capacity to improve student engagement in learning and student learning outcomes, reduce disruptive behaviour and suspensions and improve attendance and retention in the context of fostering co-operation between schools, TAFE and other agencies and community organisations.  The program was part of the NSW Government's broader social justice and capacity building agenda.

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The Priority Action Schools Program, was conceived of as a knowledge based program in that schools were required to create and share professional knowledge in the manner advocated by Hargreaves (2003). The program aimed to model for schools a culture of collaborative enquiry. The evaluation strategy articulated in the guiding principles for evaluation, that were adopted by the program, placed knowledge creation and knowledge transfer at its core.

The program was underpinned by the notion of "pressure and support" where schools were expected to  undertake action inquiry by first identifying the particular challenges they faced and then designing an appropriate means of addressing them. They were then to  document their findings in partnership with an academic associate. The pressure element was not in relation to an expectation that schools would conform to a "one size fits all" solution, but rather that they were expected to be able to explain what they were doing, why and how they were doing it and how effective their strategies were. The pressure was to provide a form of professional accountability. Schools were supported to develop a culture of collaborative enquiry by engaging in a range of professional learning opportunities implemented by the NSW Department of Education and Training State PASP Team.  These included:

- Working with an academic partner or critical friend  (A Forum was conducted for academic partners and critical friends around the expectations of their role throughout the program)
- Principals and school leaders participating being trained in the process of action inquiry
- Principals and school leaders being provided with a rich set of strategies for collecting evidence
- Actively participating in mid year evaluation visits by the State Team and academic partners
- Documenting learning through the School Learning Portfolio
- Publishing and sharing knowledge
- Presenting to peers at The  PASP Conference "Growing our knowledge".

As well as support offered at the program level, schools themselves designed and implemented a range of professional learning strategies. Each of these is reported upon briefly:

*Making Explicit Shared Beliefs and Values:*

A number of schools developed platforms of shared beliefs or values on which to base an agreed learning goal for the whole school community. With a common learning goal, resources especially collaborative time were more efficiently utilized. These schools identified a shift in culture by observing that their collaborative time was no longer dominated by administration and operational matters but by professional dialogue about "pedagogy".

*Using a Conference Model:*

Other schools organized whole of school conferences "off site", where teachers focused on the learning required to improve their practice. Experts provided key note addresses, workshops, readings and research to be shared across the school. To consolidate the learning from the conferences schools invited consultants and school experts from both inside and outside the school to continue the professional dialogue in staff meetings. Whilst this is not unusual practice what strengthened the outcome was that the school's learning had to be documented and the conferences had to align clearly to a longer term goal and/or overarching aim.

*Addressing the Needs of a Specific Cohort:*

Rather than undertake a whole school approach some schools created a cultural shift by focusing on a significant student cohort in the school and established collaborative enquiry models with the teachers of this cohort. These "wedge groups" were often stage based teams focusing on transition points in student learning. Working collaboratively teachers planned, programmed, designed learning and assessment for their students who they would often team teach.

The success of these teachers as early adopters of new ways of thinking or doing business had a dramatic impact on the culture of the school. A critical factor for success in leveraging change across the whole school was the collection of evidence to demonstrate improved student learning outcomes, and reporting these results to the rest of the staff. The assistance of the academic partners in this work was acknowledged by many schools.

*Professional Learning Teams:*

Many PASP schools established Professional Learning Teams with structured time for teachers to engage in collaborative enquiry focusing on a common agreed learning goal. The composition of the Professional Learning Teams varied from context to context. In one high school the Professional Learning Teams were composed of teachers across faculties but all focusing on assessment. Another high school allowed each Professional Learning Team to determine its own learning goal within the school's overarching aim of improvement in pedagogy.

Schools identified that successful professional learning teams have:
- Clear expectations of change/outcomes
- carefully defined learning goals
- clearly defined roles for members
- structured and regular meeting times
- quarantined time from other aspects of teachers' work
- a location for meeting which is different or removed from teachers' usual workspace
- different mixes of personnel eg teachers and executive from other faculties
- an external critical friend or academic partner.

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*Learning Centres:*

Other PASP schools created a culture of collaborative enquiry by establishing learning centres within the school. For example, in one case the school marshaled all of the school's human and physical resources in literacy into the learning centre. Previously the literacy experts had worked independently of each other.  However with the establishment of the centre, they worked collaboratively planning the work of the centre with the mainstream teachers. Students were nominated to the centre by their teachers and attended regular literacy sessions timetabled each week. During one of these sessions the main stream teachers were released to observe their students participating in the demonstrated strategies of the "expert" teachers.

The repertoires of the mainstream teachers were significantly increased as they were supported to embed new literacy strategies into their own practice. The school reported improved literacy outcomes for students in the centre, but importantly that the students continued to make significant improvement sustained by the similar strategies learned by their mainstream teachers.

Parents were also partners in the centre, learning how to support their children at home. They were trained by the literacy experts and were able to observe their own children learning in the centre.

*Learning Technology Centres:*

Other schools established Technology Learning Centres, to build teacher capacity in ICT. The expert ICT teacher collaboratively programmed with the classroom teacher identifying the requisite ICT skills students would require. The expert ICT teacher taught these skills to the students within the centre, modeling this practice for the mainstream teachers. Collaborative enquiry into effective programming and the integration of ICT lead to seamless student work between the centre and the mainstream classroom. Parents were also partners in this enterprise being able to use the centre after hours to undertake training in ICT. Schools reported improvement on statewide tests in computer skills.

*Mentoring and Modeling:*

Schools also reported the effectiveness of mentoring and modeling as professional learning strategies. Careful role descriptions and responsibilities and planning were necessary elements for success. Matching the mentor to the teacher being mentored was critical so that this was not "the hierarchical dispensation of wisdom but rather shared inquiry into practice"

Modeling was consistently described as a most successful professional learning strategy. One critical factor for success identified by the schools is that the teacher modeling the practice should be a respected and experienced staff member released from other duties to demonstrate strategies with the other teachers' own students.

Where there was a culture of collaborative enquiry teachers felt confident to experiment with the modeled strategies, reflect on their practice and engage in professional dialogue thus transferring the knowledge within the school context. The authenticity of observing modelled practice with the teacher's own students was convincing "proof" for teachers in how to improve their own practice. Significant improvement on statewide tests was observed where focused and intensive mentoring occurred.

*Team Teaching:*

Team teaching was another professional learning strategy often utilized by the PASP schools which they reported required effective relationship management. Recommendations by school leaders for buddying teachers together in varying combinations eg novice with expert, novice and novice, subject expert with novice, supervisor with new appointee had varying impacts and always relied on the establishment of a trusted relationship.

One school invested a considerable time in defining the roles and responsibilities of each member of the team. By documenting the roles they hoped to overcome the tensions they had experienced for instance about who would report on student achievement or who had responsibility for assessment. This clarity made some pairings more successful, but others felt that the process was more successful when the relationship was more intuitive.

*Re-thinking Pedagogy:*

Many academics and consultants worked with schools focussing on the "productive pedagogies" as described in the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study Final Report (QSRLS) and as promoted through the Quality Teaching in NSW public schools documentation. Having a meta-language for their practice allowed teachers to engage in deep professional dialogue assisting these schools to make significant cultural shifts. Teachers used the coding manuals to plan learning and observe teaching. In PSx school teachers collaboratively planned a lesson and observed each other teach using the coding manual. They asked three students in the class what they believed they had learned and reflected on their own practice. Meeting together later they triangulated their data to understand whether what was planned and taught was actually learned and how it could be improved.

*Student Voice:*

In one case a Boys High School, supported by an academic partner undertook a process of listening to the student voice as the "consequential stakeholders" of learning in the school. Stage 5 students were trained in how to conduct a focus group. They then conducted focus groups with Stage 4 students about "learning in the school" and reported their findings to the staff. In addition the academic partner interviewed a sample of individual senior students who reflected upon ways in which their learning was supported in the family, in the community and in the school. Collaborative enquiry in a school

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context, that involved the students themselves, extended the knowledge gained and strengthened the quality of the enquiry.

*Networked Schools:*

Whilst each school in the PASP is unique they share some similar contextual issues. Therefore where schools were networked there were significant learning gains. A group of primary schools in south-western Sydney was an example in point. Mentored by an academic partner the schools worked together to develop shared knowledge and supported each other to in the development of their school learning portfolios.

In another instance a secondary collegiate, composed of four campuses  designed to provide breadth and balance in the curriculum not only networked between themselves but also with their local primary schools. One campus employed experienced primary teachers who provided models of teaching strategies that reflected a more primary school oriented pedagogy with respect to numeracy and literacy skills. As well teams reprogrammed lessons and curriculum units in Year 7. As a result they were able to demonstrate significant value added improvement in statewide literacy tests.

**Broad Professional Learning Issues:**

While this brief paper cannot detail the range and complexity of the professional learning that occurred at the school, regional and system levels it became clear during the first year of the implementation of the program that substantial, wide-ranging professional issues emerged. These relate to: the processes for documenting and reflecting upon learning beyond the individual practitioner via the development of the school learning portfolio; the role of the academic partner; the impact of social geography; and matters associated with sustainability and capacity building.

*The School Learning Portfolio:*

It would seem axiomatic to say that schools are places where learning happens. Increasingly, today, there is a recognition that schools are places where teachers learn along with and as well as their students. They learn what is expected of them; their craft, their professional responsibilities, their need to develop new strategies in response to new policies; as well as that which arises from their daily interactions with their peers, students and the community. Learning, with all of its positive and negative connotations, is the stuff of life. What is less recognised is that schools can also be seen as corporate learning organisations where it is the institution itself that learns, learns to adapt and cope, learns to innovate and learns to be resilient. This perspective was new to many of the PASP schools, but was central to the success of the program.

MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed (2004) have focused upon schools as institutions that are dynamic and organic in their nature. Drawing on notions of multiple intelligence and recent thinking about the nature of organisations, they offer a way of looking at schools as living systems through the exploration of the concept of the *'intelligent school'*. For

them, intelligent schools are "human communities that are continuously developing their capacity for improvement. The intelligent school, then, is a learning school. As Harris and Volet (1997) have observed there is now a significant body of literature which addresses workplace learning and its relationship to organisational change and development (p.28).  Senge's (1990) book *The Fifth Discipline* gave voice to the concept of the learning organisation as a place where people are encouraged to learn together in ways which are fresh and innovative.  While much of the advocacy for organisational learning had its genesis in business and commerce it can certainly be seen to be applicable to educational enterprises as it was in relation to the Priority Action Schools Project.

The school, its practices and its culture,was to be seen as the unit which can learn and professionally grow. Much previous work has been undertaken regarding the recording of the individual professional learning growth of teachers. For example, Retallick and Groundwater-Smith (1996) sought to provide a rationale and set of processes whereby the individual teacher could document and critique his or her professional learning through the medium of a learning portfolio. The process has now developed further to accommodate to the notions of corporate learning.

Thus the corporate learning portfolio has been defined as: "Evidence based documentation of organisational learning regarding a workplace transformation". PASP schools, over the first year of the program and with the pressure and support described above were able to create substantial and impressive portfolios using a wide range of data gathering processes and individual and collective reflections.

*Academic Partners:*

Schools were guided in the development of their portfolios by their academic partners, who not only assisted in identifying, gathering and interpreting appropriate evidence, but also provided advice regarding teaching and learning strategies and curriculum construction. Mandating that schools have an academic partner, mentor or other critical friend was a key element of the Program and its evaluation. Professional learning resulted both from the academic resources that the partner could provide and from engaging with one not directly involved in the day to day routines of the school[1] and was thus able to bring a new lens to bear upon the school's practices.

Managing relationships with "outsiders" is not always easy or comfortable. Schools had to develop protocols that would set out what their expectations were and how they might be realized. Reciprocally, academic partners needed to establish what was feasible and realistic. In their research on academic partnerships in the UK McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins (2004) found that there were different understandings of the terms of engagement, including the ways in which those in schools and those in universities might understand educational research and inquiry. This was certainly true of the schools in the program. Many did not establish explicit agreements at the outset of their projects. While

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[1] Although, in several cases the academic partner became a participant observer, or 'expert consultant' who undertook a variety of roles, including modeling and mentoring practice.

for most this was not necessarily problematic and roles were clarified as the work progressed, for some schools and academics the lack of clarity did present difficulties.

All the same, for many schools it was the relationship with the academic partner that made manageable the initially daunting task of implementing what were new and challenging strategies designed to better engage learners. Critical to this relationship was the familiarity of both the school and the partner with goals, purposes and contexts. It seemed that those schools which had long-standing relationships with universities and/or critical friends were more able to move quickly.

It is important, again, to recognize the role that DET district and PASP personnel played in assisting schools in developing sound partnership arrangements. Differences most commonly arose from expectations that the academic partners would evaluate practices and write up the portfolio, or that they would pursue their own particular research interests. While these situations were rare, the watching brief held by the PASP personnel ensured that it was essential that mutual trust and respect be established. Where this was not possible then a change in arrangements would be necessary.

Clearly, there was variation in the what and how of establishing academic partnerships. While schools in metropolitan areas generally had access to academics from a number of different universities, more remote and isolated schools were differently placed. Throughout the PASP it has become apparent that much has to be learned about the impact of social geography upon the ways in which schools operate.

*Social Geography*

In discussing social geography in their report, Groundwater-Smith & Kemmis (2004) quoted an academic partner:

> My overall impression of the school – staff and many parents – was one of shell-shocked and battle-weary people who had not given up where many others would have left long ago. (p.128)

Taking into account the criteria for selection to participate in the program it is not surprising that PASP schools are located in some of the most disadvantaged communities in NSW with multiple and compounding forms of disadvantage impacting on students and their families. As well as economic and associated health problems that arise from severe poverty there are difficulties related to ethnicity, Aboriginality, and geographic isolation. A particularly distinctive feature of the PASP was the recognition that local solutions needed to be tailored to local problems and that a "one size fits all" policy would be less effective than one that took account of local exigencies.

Thomson (2000) in drawing attention to the skewed distribution of schooling credentials as an outcome of the varying distribution of social resources through different spaces and places notes:

> … the coincidence of privilege and school success is produced through chains and webs of interconnected decisions, in which schools, school systems, credentialling authorities, funding and policy bodies, universities, families and employers all play a part. Despite a variety of different policy approaches (but not differentiated policy approaches)[2] and interventions, there is compelling evidence that there has been little shift in post war Australia in the hierarchies of culture and power that produce spatially and socially distributed educational outcomes. (p.3)

In reporting upon the distribution of disadvantage in Australia, Vinson (2003) argued:

> …neighbourhood effects are stronger at certain times in people's development. In particular, it seems that neighbourhoods affect life chances during early childhood and late adolescence; the very times when a just society would be most anxious to open up life opportunities to children and young people…. The development of mental and scholastic abilities in the crucial early years of schooling can be dampened or supported by neighbourhood effects. (p.6)

He continues by indicating that social geography can and does contribute to inter-generational reproduction with concentrations of joblessness, and raised rates of crime and incarceration (p.9). In his report *Community Adversity and Resilience* Vinson (2004) provides compelling data to indicate that disadvantage is cumulative and intergenerational within specific geographic locations. While he recognises that macro-level policies can and should be developed; they should be sufficiently flexible to respond, at the same time, to significant micro-level differentiation. Comparing this current study to one undertaken many years earlier he found that there was a 0.86 correlation between one case and the other, suggesting that little had changed in the interim. Clearly, then, place is an important determinant of access to life's chances.

Not only that, but as McGregor (2003) points out spatial dimensions within the school itself also deserve attention. She argues that studies of the workplaces of teachers "take the spatial dimensions for granted, either ignoring it entirely or focusing on the spaces of the classroom, staffroom and school as fixed and bounded (p.353). Many of the PASP schools are situated in old and inadequate buildings even further compounding their disadvantage. Groundwater-Smith (2004) in her conclusion to a discussion regarding places and spaces for learning argued:

> In the foreseeable future it will continue to be the case that society expects its young people to attend school, not only to be educated, but also to be safe. Schools clearly serve a custodial function. For all the futurist discussions of e-learning, with students learning in a variety of places and spaces, for most of them, for most of the time, they will be in schools. We need to ensure that those schools are places to which they genuinely want to go, where they and their learning is respected. That they are places that are civilised and civilising, honouring students, teachers and the community alike. (p.16)

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[2] Our insertion

Social geography, then, is manifest at the State, regional and local levels thus providing a compelling argument for the kind of local problem solving developed through the PASP. This was a significant learning for the policy makers with the DET itself.

*Sustainability and Capacity Building:*

In their conclusion to the meta evaluation Groundwater-Smith & Kemmis drew attention to the expectation that schools would not necessarily remain on the program as a matter of course (although they did recommend that the program itself, with its specific features, should be sustained). This being so it was seen that schools should not depend upon its features as a fixed long term strategy, but that they should seek to develop solutions that build capacity within the school. It was recognized that this is no easy matter given the often high mobility of staff in challenging schools. All the same, it was and continues to be believed that where the school develops a culture that has high expectations of its students and one that recognizes and nurtures its staff the likelihood of the elements of the program continuing beyond its funded life is greater.

Nonetheless, such culture building cannot occur overnight. The learnings captured in the school portfolios and the meta-evaluation must themselves continue to grow. As we said at the outset to this paper – professional learning is always unfinished business.

**Conclusion:**

It became apparent through PASP that when teachers engage in collaborative enquiry supported by professional learning strategies, and where they focus on their teaching that student learning outcomes, teachers' practice and whole school learning culture improve. The program allowed schools flexibility to meet their own contextual needs within a statewide framework. Thus the dynamics of each school was able to be accommodated within the basic tenets of professional learning, educational accountability and productive partnerships. The sense for schools and teachers that they were pioneering new ways of learning for their contexts and that their professional experiences were valued was hugely positive for morale in schools, teachers' expectations and shifts in school learning cultures.

This finding accords with that of McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins (2004) who examined the effects and benefits of action inquiry in schools, namely:

- It (action inquiry) resulted in a renewed feeling of pride and excitement about teaching and in a revitalised sense of oneself as a teacher.

- The research experience reminded teachers of their intellectual capability and the importance of that capability to their professional lives.

- The research experience allowed teachers to see that the work that they do in school matters.

- The research experience reconnected many of the teachers to their colleagues and to their initial commitments to teach.

- The research experience encouraged teachers to develop an expanded sense of what teachers can and ought to do.

- The research experience restored in teachers a sense of professionalism and power in the sense of having a voice.

Learnings from the PASP, including the benefits of academic partnerships, have been incorporated into a range of other programs and initiatives across the Department. For the Priority Action Schools program itself there is a need to remain at the cutting edge of pedagogy, to be relentless in the expectation of quality learning for both students and teachers and to continue to operate in a context of professional development and educational accountability – every child's learning counts.

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