Creating a Collaborative Culture in a National Schools Project School.

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CREATING A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE IN A NATIONAL SCHOOLS PROJECT PILOT SCHOOL

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WHY JOIN THE NATIONAL SCHOOLS PROJECT

The school's desire to be a part of the National Schools Project arose from its local circumstances. Situated in the northern suburbs of Adelaide, Salisbury North Primary School caters to a highly disadvantaged community. Over 80 per cent of students are from households whose income is low enough to qualify for government assistance. This figure has been steadily rising over the last few years. The student population is also remarkable diverse. Of an enrolment of 280 children in year levels 3-7, thirty percent are of non-English speaking background, twenty five percent are part of a new arrivals program, and over 10 percent are Aboriginal.

Recent tests, carried out as part of a research project by the University of South Australia, suggest that many of these children are more than two years below average in attainment. The behaviour of a small but significant percentage of students is highly disruptive. These factors led to questions being asked by members of the staff about how the school organisation could be improved so as to ensure that the learning potential of these students was realised. Participation in the National Schools Project seemed to offer an opportunity to critically examine current practice. The Project also provided a mandate to consider radical options which might help the staff and community achieve their objectives.

The initial proposal to join the National Schools Project focused on a number of areas for possible development. One was the improvement of transition processes from year seven to high school. Another was improved methods of monitoring student learning outcomes at the classroom level. A third was the establishment of teams of teachers sharing the task of teaching groups of children. Of these three original themes, two have survived in recognisable form. Transition to high school was taken up by primary staff at a cluster level. The intention to develop improved monitoring of learning outcomes later became subsumed into the school's work on National Profiles. It was the third area which

became the central focus of the National Schools Project commitment. The notion of 'team teaching' was broadened to include the work of school services officers (support staff who are not qualified teachers) as the result of the inclusion of a school services officer in the original think tank.

It is tempting to see the process of change as a linear progression through four stages - design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of agreed policy outcomes. What actually happened is that all these stages occurred simultaneously. The formation of teaching teams had been canvassed by a number of staff during 1991. At the beginning of 1992, two women staff formed an upper primary team, and during the year, three teachers formally combined their classes. On one occasion, two school services officers independently restructured their administration workload in order to increase the number of contact hours in the classroom. A variety of approaches to team teaching were trialled with minimal reference to the official 'think tank'. One team had developed a plan for exchanging all teaching time provided to the class by specialist teachers for an additional staff member, not without some anxiety on the part of the specialist teachers. These developments occurred in tandem with a more structured and planned approach as individuals and groups recognised opportunities to work in a new ways.

THE CONCEPT OF THE SELF-MANAGEMENT UNIT

A key idea that emerged in think tank discussions was the concept of the self-managing unit. The concept seemed to be a logical extension of the increasing amount of team teaching which was occurring. This concept became the major conceptual vehicle for the reorganisation. A self-managing unit was defined as a group of children, teachers and ancillary staff who plan the curriculum delivery for 60-120 children of various year levels and work together as a group for more than one year. Staff specialise in various learning areas and share a physical space. The members of the self-managing unit engage in peer support and peer appraisal as well as cross-age tutoring. They

represent the unit in the decision making structure and have responsibility for deploying financial and other resources and for planning training and development programs. Teachers assume leadership roles within the unit, which develops into a collegial support group in which each member takes responsibility for encouraging the professional growth of other members.

The self-managing unit promised opportunities for teachers to help one another in professional development as well as model the forms of collaborative work expected to students. Teachers and students would be able to build relationships over a number of years. There would be less preparation as teachers specialised in their work and there was the prospect of better quality lessons as teachers worked in areas of strength. These structures appeared to be more in tune with the needs of young adolescents.

There were many significant features of the existing school climate that made the idea of the self-managing unit seem a logical next step and allowed for the exploration of new ideas.

- The principal believed that team work was vital and that teachers should have a major say in how the concept of the self-managing team was expanded;

- staff participated in decision-making and there was an atmosphere of trust;

- the school has a history of active union involvement and good industrial relations;

- the open space architecture of the school favoured the development of team approaches;

- two teachers had been working in a team since 1990, were highly respected by staff, and their teaching was highly regarded by the principal;

- some staff were willing to experiment with change and this experimentation was encouraged; and

- staff were willing to keep an open mind about changes.

The idea of the self-managing unit was not simply presented to staff as the solution to all their problems. It was essential that all staff considered the merits of the idea and fully thought through the implications of involvement. The first year in the Project was one in which staff considered many ways of reorganising both teachers' work and the work of school services officers. The support

provided by the Project was crucial in building a common vision and ownership of the changes. In this first year, involvement in the National Schools Project allowed for regular meetings of a representative think tank group, participation in state-wide learning programs, exchanges with other schools, and the time needed to reflect and plan. There was a mixture of excitement and apprehension as the Project began to take shape.

CREATING A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

Creating a collaborative culture turned out to be a particularly severe test of the school's readiness for change and ability to manage change successfully. For a number of reasons, the decision to develop collaborative ways of working was particularly threatening for some teachers. The creation of a collaborative teaching action plan may have been interpreted as a way of forcing people to collaborate. The process may have threatened the maturation of a naturally evolving collaborative culture by placing the emphasis on implementation instead of exploration, creating a climate of impatience with the rate of change, engendering resistance in teachers who valued an individualistic culture, and requiring people to defend plans rather than explore alternatives.

Until this point, collaboration between teachers had developed slowly as teachers got to know one another. The first team had worked as individual teachers who had begun to cooperate in certain activities before finally taking the leap into team teaching. Through this period of building a professional relationship there was no expectation that they had to make it work. Their collaboration was encouraged by the open support of the principal and through practical means, such as arranging common free periods to allow planning. Factors, such as having rapport with members of one's team, were not addressed by the plan. and there was some difference of opinion on whether staff needed to be taught the skills of collaboration. Attempts to institutionalise support for team teaching by giving preferential treatment to teams were resented by some staff.

THE SELF-MANAGING UNIT STRUCTURES

At this point it was essential to clearly spell out what forms of collaboration were minimum expectations. In order to proceed with the commitment of all staff it was agreed that while participation in a self-managing unit was expected, teams would be formed voluntarily. This was the key sticking point. People did not want to be forced to work with someone with whom they were not comfortable. Staff also decided that the make-up of

units would be determined by the school's personnel advisory committee, a group made up of the principal, equal opportunity representative and South Australian Institute of Teachers (SAIT) representative. This group eventually decided on arranging the units in a way which allowed for a range of levels of collaboration. The New Arrivals Program would remain a self-managing unit. It was known as the 'yellow unit'. A second unit, the 'green unit', would be made up of two teaching teams. The third unit, the 'red unit', would have new teachers, and teachers who were not yet working in teams..

In addition to these three units, there was an administration unit and a school services officer unit. Each unit met for either thirty minutes or one hour each week. Conversely, staff meetings were scheduled with thirty minutes for administration or one hour for training and development. Representatives from each unit, plus a student representative, comprised the decision-making body.

This was the basic structure with which the school began in 1993. All staff in the 'green unit' were teaching in teams of three. In one case a class of 55 children was taught by three teachers, all of whom worked with the children in the morning. This arrangement, which had been discussed widely the previous year, involved 'trading in' salaries, including special education, ESL in the mainstream, and library. The teachers released one another for non-instructional time. This arrangement had the benefit of creating considerable flexibility, as well a reducing the student/teacher ratio in the morning session. Of course, the loss of specialist assistance and non-instructional time, plus the industrial implications of this arrangement, had caused some concerns, with the go ahead eventually being given by both staff and SAIT branch meetings after lengthy consultation and discussion. The other team in this unit operated as a 'mini school', with a high level of specialisation and the development of a variety of configurations of groups to meet the diverse needs of their 'school' of 80 children. Team members took it upon themselves to become expert in a particular area of the curriculum and then, as instructional teachers, they trained the other team members.

In other unit arrangements, school services officers arranged their work so that the amount of time spent in classes increased by 70 percent. This occurred through alterations to work practices that had been discussed by the student services officers' self-managing unit. The school services officers really became involved in the spirit of the National

Schools Project and were quick to put in place changes that had a direct benefit to children. The 'yellow unit' staff, specialists in the teaching of new arrivals children, developed collaborative approaches which involved staff from other units, including cross-age tutoring between students with minimal English and those from English speaking backgrounds.

THE PART PLAYED BY 'CRITICAL FRIENDS'

Information was gathered in a variety of ways to determine how the new arrangements were working. A survey on decision-making was circulated to staff. Staff were interviewed about the changes. Students and parents were also surveyed. Early in the second term the school participated in a major activity of the National Schools Project - a visit by 'critical friends'. In critical friend visits, teams of four or five colleagues, including ancillary staff, visit a school to view, question, discuss and challenge the school's purposes and activities. The visit provides an outside perspective and offers constructive questioning and critique of the school's plan and actions. This supports the school's ongoing reflection and rethinking. The main outcome of the visit is a record of the key issues and questions, which is owned by the school. The approach is constructive, formative, non-judgemental, and discrete.

These surveys, interviews and the critical friend visit pointed out the benefits which had followed as a result of the schools reorganisation. These included:

- increased job satisfaction through collaboration;

- improved quality of tuition and improved learning outcomes for children; and

- greater job satisfaction for staff services officers due to their increased contact with children.

The advantages of collaborative work were particularly evident in the 'green unit' in which two teams each of three teachers were working in new and exciting ways. The student services officers arrangements, after some initial difficulties with timetables, were producing improved job satisfaction. The administration unit was developing a high level of cohesion. The 'yellow unit' with responsibility for the New Arrivals a Program unit, was particularly satisfied with the decision-making arrangements. The 'red unit', by contrast, was increasingly isolated from these benefits. A clear message from interviews indicated that while there was increased collaboration within the units, the school as a

whole was less collaborative. Members of the 'red unit' began to feel increasingly irrelevant to the restructure. The critical friend team also commented on the lack of communication between unit; the fragmented nature of students services officers work and the absence of a well-understood, school-wide approach to collaboration.

The critical friend team posed several questions:

- How can the school maintain and develop the huge advantages of collaborative groups, while increasing cohesiveness, improving internal communication and clarity of decision-making, and providing mutual support for staff across the whole school?

- What expectations of collaboration should the school have for all staff?

- What support should the school provide to ensure all staff can initiate and succeed in at least some degree of teaming, and then further develop their collaborative skills?

- How might the time and deployment of school services officers be organised so that their classroom work is incorporated into class or team planning, to enable it to be more productive, challenging and pertinent to the students' learning program?

ASSESSING THE RESULTS

These reviews of the changes suggest that there are significant benefits to be gained through the reorganisation. The working lives of staff and students have improved. Decision-making is inclusive and allows for full and open participation by members of staff. An atmosphere of trust is widespread throughout the school in spite of the difficulties and tensions created by the changes. There is school-wide commitment and ownership of the changes. There are also areas of weakness. There is a sense of isolation in one of the units. The induction of new staff could have been improved. The National School Project could have been more effective. Fortunately, these areas of concern have been noted by all staff and their common determination to address the concerns means that it is unlikely that the weaknesses in communication processes between units will become divisive or lead to opposition to the changes by some groups.

Specific actions which have already been discussed include the need to revisit the reasons for beginning these changes, to ground the change once more in beliefs about how children best learn. Communication channels will be created between units, and several cross-unit activities are being planned which will address the issue of inter-unit communication and school cohesion. Integration of school development planning and National Schools Project planning should result in a narrowing of the school focus, and address concerns about the complexity and demands created by separate Project action plans. And a revisiting of the school's basic vision statement is planned in order to re-examine basic values and build again on common beliefs.

Based on its experiences, the school will develop a set of principles which relate to collaborative work. it is important that all staff take part in the development of these principles, which will provide support and guidance for staff new to the school and provide a template for the evaluation and monitoring of our work as a collaborative learning community. Such a statement of principles will also provide a basis for negotiation with the Education Department over resourcing and personnel issues. The statement of principles will also be used for internal purposes. For example, the principles will be reflected in all school-level planning documents, establish minimum agreed expectations for all staff and establish the rights of staff with regard to training and development.

A FINAL REFLECTION

The restructure has taken a great deal of effort and time. There have been many significant achievements. There have also been some unfulfilled promises. In order to take the next step forward and more fully realise the potential of the self-managing unit, the school must examine again the fundamentals of its reorganisation. There must be collective reflection on the decision to become a part of the National Schools Project and what this offers all members of the school community. Allied with this is the need to ask the same questions which marked the beginning of the reorganisations - what needs to change? The current changes, as creative and worthwhile as they appear to be, are fundamentally fragile and need to be built into the culture of the school if they are not to become just another interesting experiment.

Salisbury North Primary School has the potential to create a unique learning community. Considered separately, the innovations that are emerging are not new. However, what is particularly noteworthy is the extent to which the staff have integrated these ideas into their work,

the widespread nature of collaboration, and the fact that the ideas have sprung from the grassroots - they have grown from the experience, expertise and imagination of classroom teachers and school services officers.