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Max Angus
Edith Cowan University

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THE AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF TEACHER EDUCATION

Special Issue: The National Schools Project and School Restructuring

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INTRODUCTION

Max Angus
Edith Cowan University

What has the current wave of school reform to do with teacher education? Not much at all would be the view of many teacher educators who look askance at the Dawkins' restructuring of higher education, the unrelenting, never-ending restructuring of government school systems by state governments, the gamut of training reforms that has overtaken the post-compulsory schooling sector and, more recently, the workplace reform agendas of Commonwealth and State governments. Teacher education seems to be the one solid rock around which wave after wave of school reform can crash without discernible erosion. If the job of teacher educators is to prepare teachers for the schools of tomorrow, and if the schools of tomorrow will resemble the schools of today, why should the practice of pre-service teacher education change? Unless teacher educators share a commitment with teacher colleagues in schools to change the nature of schooling then this simple, though fundamental, argument is difficult to rebut.

This issue will focus on the National Schools Project, an ambitious action research project involving 200 schools across the country. At one level, the Project is only incidentally pertinent to teacher educators - it has been a large, costly attempt to change the way schools operate; should it succeed in the longer term in achieving its purposes, prospective teachers will require a new range of skills and understandings. There is a second more immediate reason. In some states, teacher educators have played an influential role as 'critical friends' of school staff engaged in the taxing task of changing the way schools operate. Their work, and the principles that have underpinned the way in which they have worked in schools, suggest that 'teacher educator' may no longer be an appropriate appellation for university-based educators, smacking as it does of an expert-novice relationship. School teachers and university teachers are learners as well as educators. Finally, it is conceivable that school restructuring may provide lessons for imminent teacher education restructuring.

Sharon Burrow, President of the Australian Education Union, argues that teachers must take responsibility for their own learning if they are to survive in a world of constant change. The kind of

learning that will allow teachers to take more control of their professional lives is unlikely to come from one-shot inservice courses on topics only marginally related to the problems-at-hand. Instead the school must become a professional community in which teachers collectively identify a problem relating to student learning and then seek to rectify it. The National Schools Project is seeking to turn schools into institutions where learning from these kinds of activities becomes the core of professional development. Where do teacher educators fit into the picture?

There are several points of entry for teacher educators. At a pre-service level, teacher education programs could be constructed to promote attitudes of inquiry, questioning of the status-quo, and reflection. No doubt in the rhetoric of most teacher education institutions there is reference to these attitudes and skills. But whether the practice of teacher education corresponds with the rhetoric is another matter. Coverage of course content in pre-service programs often militates against inquiry (reflecting the pattern of learning in many schools). In a market of over-supply, prospective teachers are more inclined to learn the attitude of compliance than the disposition to question what they see and experience.

A second entry point for teacher educators is to serve as 'critical friends' to teachers in schools re-thinking how they go about their work. Susan Groundwater-Smith, Judy Parker and Michael Arthur eloquently describe how they fashioned partnerships with schools in New South Wales associated with the National Schools Project. Their account of how teacher educators contribute to the work of schools differs sharply from the orthodox relationship between teachers and academics in which the 'experts' communicate to teachers research knowledge that wears the warrant of social science and is slotted into some remote corner of teachers' minds. Groundwater-Smith and her colleagues may be pointing to an emerging orthodoxy for teacher educators. Whether the idea is carried further and manifest in some kind of 'professional development school', as described by Burrow, remains to be seen. It is noteworthy that the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training has seen fit to include in its guidelines for the support of teacher

professional development, reference to the concept of the 'professional development school'.

John Rooney, a teacher in a pilot school in South Australia, and Alistair Dow, the school's principal, present a perspective from the delivery end of the Project. The key feature of their school's restructuring has been the adoption of the 'self-managing unit' (referred to earlier by Sharon Burrow). Rooney and Dow describe how by adopting these new work organisation structures they sought to establish a more collaborative teaching and learning environment. One of the key features of the collaboration has been the engagement of teaching and non-teaching staff as team members. The role of 'critical friends', more fully illustrated in the article in this issue by Groundwater-Smith and her colleagues was clearly an important factor in enabling school restructuring to go ahead. It is clear from the account of Rooney and Dow that teachers fitting into their school would need a different profile of skills than is conventionally supplied through pre-service and inservice programs. Indeed, the contribution of the school services officers to the educational program of the school challenges the relevance and usefulness of the stereotype of the teacher which serves as the model for most teacher education programs in Australia.

Has the National Schools Project succeeded? It depends from whose perspective the Project is examined. The project emerged from the award restructuring activities of the late 80s. Teacher union and teacher employer officials, strongly encouraged by Commonwealth and Australian Council of Trade Union officials, agreed to examine the regulatory framework guiding the work of schools and remove, or reshape, awards, regulations and policies which inhibited good practice. It was assumed that schools were unable to implement sound innovative methods of teaching because of unduly restrictive work organisation rules.

The industrial parties agreed to change the rules if the Project pilot schools were able to demonstrate that compliance with these rules inhibited student learning. The Project revealed little evidence that the formal regulatory system was hamstringing good practice. Max Angus, a former chair of the Project's national steering committee seeks to explain this phenomenon. Does the formal regulatory system have any significant bearing on the quality of teaching and learning? Or are the impediments to be found in the culture of the school? Angus argues that neither the formal nor informal rule system separately explains the progress made by the pilot schools; the formal and

informal rules combine to define the limits of acceptable practice.

In both an organisational and cultural sense, schools of teacher education can be compared with primary and secondary schools. Their business is learning. Their methods are constrained by formal rules and by culture. Restructuring in teacher education institutions meets the same kinds of problems as restructuring in schools - patterns of work organisation absorbed into the taken-for-granted culture of the organisation. Teacher educators might usefully learn from the efforts of pilot schools in the National Schools Project and apply those lessons to their own institutions - that is, those teacher educators convinced that the teachers for tomorrow's schools must acquire their skills and professional knowledge in institutions more like the schools of tomorrow.

William Loudon and John Wallace examine the National Schools Project from the school perspective and explore the extent to which changes in practice in the pilot schools can be attributed to the Project. What kind of dynamic has led to the changes? What features of the National Schools Project can account for the changes. Loudon and Wallace, who have served as critical friends to pilot schools, are cautiously optimistic about the prospect of school reform based on the alliances and principles underpinning the National Schools Project where unions and employers are pledged to support the implementation of ideas germinated in schools in response to problems recognised by schools. The power of the project, they argue, has come from the sharing of a commitment by these parties to make things better.

Readers should note that several of the manuscripts for this issue were received shortly before the formal end of the National Schools Project in December 1993. Unions and employers on the Governing Board of the National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning (NPQTL) had agreed that the National Schools Project would finish with the dissolution of the NPQTL after a three-year life term. However, it became evident to all the parties that the National Schools Project was 'mid-flight'. To terminate it would waste a lot of effort, anger participants, many of whom had barely begun the long haul of school restructuring, and most of all, neuter a very promising and novel approach to school reform. Towards the end of 1993 Unions and employers agreed on the parameters for a new structure to support the extension of the Project. Renamed the National Schools Network, a secretariat has been established under the aegis of the New South

Wales Department of School Education and substantial funding provided by the Commonwealth Government to support national co-ordination of the Network over the next three years. The fact that a non-Labor government in the largest Australian state volunteered to house the Network can be interpreted as an auspicious start.