Research and Development as an Essential Work Practice for Teachers.

Sharan Burrow  
*Australian Education Union*
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**CHANGING VIEWS OF WORK AND LEARNING:**

Educators who have promoted the societal value of life-long learning must take heart from the growing acceptance by business and industry leaders that career-long education and development is essential for their survival. This dawning realisation has been prompted by the harsh realities of competitive, global economics. Increasingly business leaders recognise that managers and employees must learn and adapt or contract and shut down. Ironically, much of the tough language of business and industry in regard to essential learnings and understandings (competencies) can be found in documented debate, system reports and teacher discourse of the seventies, a discourse labelled 'soft' by those who placed their faith in a narrow, fundamentalist, core skills approach to school education and training. Though sputterings of "back to the basics!" are still heard from time to time, these views are held by a conservative (albeit still powerful) minority.

Futureists, such as Senge (1990), and organisational theorists, such as Handy (1985), have convinced business and union leaders, and progressively those who work on the shop floor, that current work practices must change, and change quickly, if industries are to survive without protection in an international marketplace. But change from what? McKinnon (1991) identifies six salient features of contemporary work organisation:

1. an external source of control over work and the conditions of work;
2. fragmentation of the productive labour process with a social and technical division of labour;
3. extrinsic rewards for work in the form of wages and bonuses;
4. an uneven reward structure based on competitive rather than co-operative principles;
5. submissiveness and conformity required by a typically authoritarian organisation of work and an acceptance of a secondary role for human labour which is being replaced by machines; and
6. a hierarchically organised workplace based on chains of command which are, in their turn, dependent upon differentials in authority, expertise and status.

These features are characteristic not only of business and industry worksites but also of schools. McKinnon (1991) draws the parallels by describing the organisation of teaching and learning in typical Australian schools:

1. control over the learning process is vested with the teacher and not the student;
2. the learning process is fragmented socially through streaming, and technically through compartmentalisation of school subjects;
3. the rewards for work and achievement are extrinsic and take the form of marks, grades, certificates, position in class, prizes and teacher approval;
4. the reward structure is uneven and is based on competition rather than co-operation so that success for some means failure for others (in schools co-operation is often regarded as cheating);
5. rule conformity is highly valued as the normative basis of learning and schoolwork, and
6. school organisation is hierarchical and characterised by superordinate/subordinate relations between teachers and students, administrators and teachers, and between high status and low status subjects.

While critics, such as McKinnon, are able to document the work organisation architecture as it presently exists they are more hesitant in prescribing what form it should take in the future. Some of the recipes concocted by experts from the private sector seem glib to reform-hardened teachers. However, there are some common threads in the organisation restructuring literature to which more and more teachers are receptive. At the heart of the 'new' form of work organisation is the concept of self-managing work groups whose members are collectively responsible for their own planning, production and performance. This form of work organisation requires teamwork which is co-operative, informal, based on a shared 'mission' and motivated by self-determination. Leadership in such organisations is focused on co-ordination and facilitation rather than supervision.

How the notion of self-managing work groups can be translated from an industrial worksite to a school setting is an important and unanswered question. This question pre-supposes another: Should schools recur their work organisation? What is wrong with existing forms of work organisation and practice? It does not automatically follow that given the parlous state of Australian business and industry that schools should mimic a form of work organisation found suitable for car manufacturing or fruit canning. Maybe schools are better organised along hierarchical, fragmented lines with conformity and submissiveness highly valued? That would be so if we wanted conforming and submissive teachers, guiding students reluctantly through a fragmented and increasingly irrelevant curriculum. Schools must change in order to give students and teachers a 'fair deal', to provide the conditions necessary for the kind of learning required of young people in the years ahead. The changes must be carefully considered rather than generated as a knee-jerk response to industry. The self-managing team concept provides a vehicle for reshaping schools in the collective interests of teachers and students.

Translating the concept of self-managing teams into a school setting is easier said than done. There is no guide book. The starting point must begin with questioning:

- How can teachers integrate essential learnings and understandings into curriculum and assessment?
- How can teachers provide for contextual learning, rather than abstract, bookish learning?
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**EXAMPLES OF REFORM BASED ON TEACHERS' OWN LEARNING**

**Holt High School: A Professional Development School**

'Authentic reform', that is reform that is deep-seated in the organisation, such reform must be based on teachers' own learning. To illustrate this contention, two examples will be described: the Professional Development School Partnership and the National Schools Project.

The Professional Development School Partnership in Michigan enables teachers and teacher educators to work together, as equals, in order to 'reinvent' schools for the 21st century. Underpinning the partnership is the proposition that the knowledge and understandings derived from research, combined with the craft knowledge derived from practice, provide a more powerful basis for reform than either body of expert knowledge considered is isolation.

The Partnership, arising from the Holmes Group report Tomorrow's Schools, is seeking to create new kinds of institutions - exemplary schools in which university and school teachers can collaboratively develop forms of teaching and learning that model to prospective teachers the best of practice. These institutions, known as Professional Development Schools, may provide an environment that until now has been too difficult to produce because of bureaucratic, fiscal and cultural constraints.

There are six principles that guide the activities of Professional Development Schools (Holmes Group, 1990):

- Teach for understanding so that students learn for a lifetime;
- Organise the school and its classrooms as a community of learners;
- Hold these ambitious learning goals for everybody's children;
- Teach adults as well as children;
- Make reflection and inquiry a central feature of the school; and
- Invent a new organisational structure for the school.

To provide a sense of how this partnership works in reality I will relate two anecdotes from a visit to Holt High School in January 1992. Holt High
school has a re-structured week where for three hours each Wednesday morning there are no students. Rather, the time is set aside to provide for teachers’ learning. Each teacher chooses to participate in seminars that extend across a number of weeks during the course of a semester. The seminar I attended was “Teaching for Conceptual Understanding”. A panel of teachers presented an analysis of their own work and the impediments they faced as a result of school organisation in their efforts to put the six principles into practice.

The story of the constraints imposed by the school’s exam timetable, told by a young maths teacher, was startling. He had constructed his exams for the year and announced them to his students. In his hand was a copy of the timetable, with marked sections of the exam timetable. He said he had arranged for his students to break up the exam timetable into smaller sections, so that students could have a break after each section. However, he was anxious to understand the nature and extent of the problems involved. The very idea of putting a break between sections of exams was startling. He had constructed his exams for the year and announced them to his students. In his hand was a copy of the timetable, with marked sections of the exam timetable. He said he had arranged for his students to break up the exam timetable into smaller sections, so that students could have a break after each section. However, he was anxious to understand the nature and extent of the problems involved. The very idea of putting a break between sections of exams was startling.

I was anxious to understand the nature and extent of the impact of the partnership and decided to talk to both the union representative and the principal. The union spokesperson responded by indicating that three years ago the four or five protagonists were working hard to emulate a true learning community of adult professionals. The synergy of the learning community changed the roles and relationships of all the people associated with the school.

Holt High School is only one of many Professional Development Schools in the United States. Not all such schools may report such substantial progress. The key to Holt High School’s achievements lies in the disposition of its staff to inquire, reflect and learn.

The National Schools Project:

The National Schools Project (NSP) emerged as one of the major areas of research and development being sponsored by The National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning (NPQTL), a collaborative project between the Commonwealth, education systems and the teacher unions. The National Schools Project has the subtitle ‘Rethinking Schools For A Changing World’.

Teachers participating in the National Schools Project have been encouraged to investigate the nature of their work and to develop, implement and evaluate initiatives designed to enhance learning outcomes for students. The Project was designed to identify the link between students’ learning and teachers’ work (the way the work is organised and the nature of the work itself).

Although the overarching parameters for the Project were established by the Project partners and applied nationally each state and territory has its own implementation structures. This makes sense since the administration of education is a state responsibility. The states, for the most part, control the regulatory framework for school systems. Hence, the states have interpreted the Project and its guidelines with a measure of idiosyncrasy and, sometimes, self-interest.

The National Schools Project is based on the assumption that if schools are to effectively meet the needs of students in a rapidly changing world, work organisation reforms need to be made. In particular, the Project is critically interested in investigating how the concept of the ‘self-managing team’ (or ‘systems work unit’, to use the jargon of the Project) can be applied to the education ‘industry’.

The answer to this question is unlikely to be found by employing a team of experts to undertake research on teachers and schools; nor is the extensive management literature likely to contain the answer. Knowledge produced by these means has sometimes been found useful by teachers as a springboard for action, but usually the initiative comes from the teachers themselves. The National Schools Project assumes that teachers, in partnership with outside researchers, can develop a knowledge base which supports authentic restructuring, but it will be knowledge accumulated from relentless questioning, reflection and review of progress.

Essential to the Project are the principles on which it is based. They are:

1. Acceptance that the school has the primary responsibility for improving learning outcomes for students. This will necessitate a commitment to examine and detail the requirements associated with models of curriculum which make student outcomes or competencies explicit.

2. A commitment to greater participation of students in the learning process.

3. A willingness to examine current work organisation in order to identify good practice and impediments to effective teaching and/or effective management of the teaching/learning process.

4. A willingness to develop and model participative workplace procedures. This will require:

   a. an agreement by the principal and the school community to develop forms of work organisation designed to improve student learning outcomes which are characterised by appropriate decision making by the staff;

   b. participation of all staff and the community in the development of objectives of the school and how they are achieved;

   c. collaborative problem solving amongst staff;

   d. monitoring by staff of progress towards the achievement of objectives, and

   e. evaluation of the outcomes as an essential tool for review and redesign.

5. An understanding that those in the school will be involved in negotiating goals and objectives, developing strategies to carry out the work, monitoring progress, modifying strategies and evaluating outcomes.

6. An understanding and acceptance of the industrial rights and responsibilities of all parties.

It is still too early to draw any firm conclusions about the efficacy of the National Schools Project. Some schools are still clarifying the nature of the changes that they want to introduce. Preliminary evaluations (Connors, 1993) are positive. There is no doubt that many of the pilot schools have begun to develop a culture of inquiry, similar in many respects to Holt High School. There are some schools that have found the going tough; it is not clear whether they will be able to break out of their current mode of operation. However, in the schools that have made these break-throughs, often with the support of critical friends from outside their institution, there is a decided optimism that things will change for the better.

If authentic reform depends upon teacher learning (and patently it does) then structures to support teachers learning must be incorporated into the working week. This is a lesson already evident in successful school reform movements (few as they maybe). Sizer (1989), with reference to the Coalition of Essential Schools, comments:

Re-designing a school is one thing; The re-shaping or re-training of its faculty is quite another. Teacher development is critical and must be ongoing. The
Holt High School, and the many schools in the National Schools Project, have decided to be proactive, and take control rather than wait for school improvement by central formulae. To follow this route requires teachers to assume responsibility for their own learning. Schools must become sites for such learning, places where current orthodoxies are questioned, intelligent modifications to work organisation and pedagogy are trialled, and the net benefit of these modifications assessed by the people who initiated them, and who must live with the consequences. For this to happen research and development must become an essential work practice for teachers.

References

What is required is a change in the culture of our profession. We know that change will be a constant in the wider world but also in our professional lives. When we close our classroom doors on the world outside we are stating, in effect, that we as professionals can segment ourselves from the rest of society. For a while, perhaps we can, but the pressure will mount until outsiders demand another burst of restructuring.