Knowledge Building Schools – Educational Development for All

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INTRODUCTION

When our friend Rozzie was a literacy educator in a Victorian prison, she used to wear a T-shirt emblazoned with the words “How come they made up all the rules before I got here?” Her students thought the slogan very apt. The prison rules were archaic, and the reasons for many of them were long-forgotten, but they endured. So do the rules by which much of social life is structured, from turn-taking in civil conversation to lining up to go into the primary classroom, from the use of standard English in formal settings to the use of the normal curve as a guide to how many As and Es should be given in competitive assessment. And the same is true in education: many ‘rules’ endure though the reasons for them have not. Even the multi-teacher, multi-classroom school as a social technology was a response to historically-specific needs and opportunities of schooling in Britain in the 1860s and 1870s (Hamilton, 1989), evolving “architecturally and organisationally – to accommodate contemporaneous assumptions about the control and efficiency of schooling” (p.10).

The ‘rules’ by which we live our lives – in schools and in the wider community – were made “before we got here”. Even the ‘rules’ by which those ‘rules’ are challenged already exist. Thus, for example, the ‘rules’ of authoritarian teachers are long-established, as are the ‘rules’ that underpin the challenging behaviours of students who rebel against and resist classroom ‘rules’ they regard as illegitimate. Remaking education means remaking such ‘rules’ – on both sides. We recognise that remaking the ‘rules’ by which schooling is done and administered is not an undertaking for any one group alone, be it composed of teachers, administrators, policy makers or interested members of the wider community. It is a task that must engage key partners in the educational process in a grand cooperative effort of making change. The task, therefore, should be inclusive, engaging and enabling. We argue that remaking the rules of current schooling and training, and educational administration, is itself a project of education – education for development. In order to give body to our argument we shall illuminate it in terms of some of our recent work on professional development initiatives in schools that have really ‘worked’ – notably some of the initiatives described in our report Knowing Makes the Difference: Learnings from the NSW Priority Action Schools Program (Groundwater-Smith and Kemmis, 2004). In our meta-evaluation of the work of the PASP, we identified a number of strategies used by schools in communities with deep needs to make substantial changes to the ways they worked within the single year for which we observed the Program. In many PASP schools, students, teachers, school communities, principals – and the Department – changed ‘the rules’. They found ways of doing things differently in the interests of the learning outcomes of their students and the professional learning1 of teachers. Schools and the state PASP team together bent existing rules, reframed them, re-ordered their priorities. They worked within the system to show that schools and senior Departmental staff, by working together, could deploy resources differently and change habitual and existing practices of teaching and of learning in many NSW schools, based on the principle of identifying local solutions to local needs.

One of the reasons so many of the PASP schools did so well in making change was that they had some additional resources, to be sure, but more particularly they did well because they had permission, encouragement and support to explore how they might do things differently, to try new ideas in practice, to learn from carefully-observed experience, to reflect, and to change direction in the light of

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1 We prefer the term ‘professional learning’ to ‘professional development’ since the latter sometimes seems like something done to teachers rather than with them.
what they learned. The schools saw themselves as *agents* of change, not as *objects* of change (objects, that is, of someone else’s ideas about what they could or should be). Moreover, they were not *individuals* acting alone, or just in their own schools. They were regarded as *partners* in the change process — partners with the Department (through the State PASP Team), with other schools in the Program (through various Forums at which schools reported on their work), and with the communities they served.

From the beginning, PASP was structured as ‘a *knowledge-building program*’, and it insisted that the participating schools should be ‘*knowledge-building schools*’. It assumed, first, that the schools were committed to building the knowledge and capacities of their students through education and improving learning outcomes for students, and, second, that they were committed to building their own corporate or collective knowledge of and capacities to respond educatively to the educational and social needs of students in communities with deep needs, their families, and their communities.

Thus, offered this opportunity to comment on ‘professional development that works’ on the basis of our learnings as the meta-evaluators of PASP, we begin with the strongest of advocacies for the notion of ‘the knowledge-building school’.

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**KNOWLEDGE BUILDING SCHOOLS: THE WAY TO THE FUTURE**

There is an ongoing lament that “the times they are a-changing” but schools remain the same. As Slavin (2002) argued “At the dawn of the 21st century, education is finally being dragged kicking and screaming into the 20th century” (p. 16). In this invitational paper we shall certainly challenge a number of Slavin’s precepts, but it is hard to disagree with him on this point. It is our intention, here, to put the case for the *educational development of schools as knowledge building institutions* where teacher professional knowledge is recognised, affirmed, challenged and debated under conditions of mutuality and trust that permit both teachers and the schools themselves to grow and flourish in times remarkable for the pace and nature of social and material change. Under such conditions, teachers and their students are no longer seen merely as the ‘bearers of structures’, as ‘authoritarian dupes’ or ‘structural dopes’ (Hutchinson, 1996, p. 99) but as beings with agency and expertise.

While there can be no question that basic human behaviours and needs are unchanging and enduring, it cannot be doubted that the conditions in which people live out their lives, particularly in the developed world, are altering at an hitherto unimaginable rate. Frances Cairncross, senior editor of the *Economist* has mapped the trajectory of three major technological changes over the past two hundred years (Cairncross, 2002). She argues that the nineteenth century saw major changes in the transport of goods; the twentieth century in the transport of people; and the newly arrived twenty-first century in the movement of information and ideas. Western economies are rapidly transforming into knowledge economies where more and more people are engaged in the production, utilisation and analysis of ideas and services rather than the creation of something tangible and concrete.

As a consequence, knowledge creation is now a matter for significant contestation and debate as the “Knowledge Society” (Stehr, 1994) emerges and develops. Knowledge has assumed the leading role in social and economic change. Gibbons *et al.* (1994) developed our understanding that knowledge creation is not exclusively a matter for scientists and academics working in institutions but may be socially produced and distributed in the form of what they called “Mode 2 Knowledge”. Such knowledge production is concerned with the identification and solution of practical problems in the lived professional lives of practitioners and organizations untrammelled by the boundaries of single disciplines with their conventions and orthodoxies. Problem generation and problem solving are contextualised within professional practice in the face of “variously jostling publics” (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons, 2003, p. 192).

Education, as a field of practice, is concerned with professional knowledge production of the kind that can inform and enrich the lives and learning of those who participate in it. Hargreaves (1999) first drew our attention to the notion of the knowledge creating school, arguing that schools have within them significant professional knowledge, much of which is tacit and unexamined. He has since developed his argument (Hargreaves, 2003), making the case for mobilising and developing the intellectual and social capital held by practitioners in any one site; and drawing upon organisational
capital in the form of networks and external links in order to inform and improve at both local and regional levels. Importantly, he believes that moving beyond incremental innovation (swimming with the tide) to radical innovation (swimming against the tide) cannot be achieved by central direction, but requires the school itself to be a learning organization.

Of course, Hargreaves’ ideas have not been developed in isolation. He in turn has drawn upon the work of such influential writers in the fields of business and commerce as Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) who have argued for four conditions for the knowledge creating organization. They can be summarised thus:

- **socialisation** – sharing information and transforming it into personal knowledge through apprenticeship and mentoring;
- **illumination** – casting a light on tacit knowledge and thus making it explicit;
- **actualisation** – learning by doing and experimenting; and,
- **communication** – increasing the communicative space by networking.

Education, itself, has long been concerned with how professional knowledge is created, negotiated, and utilised. As Elliott (2004) observed:

Many academic researchers … have expressed concern about the fact that teachers rarely use the findings of research on education to inform their practice. We tended to argue that in order to engage teachers with research it was necessary to engage them in a form of research that addressed and sought to ameliorate the practical problems they experienced in their particular contexts of action (p. 266, emphases in original).

Knowledge building schools do just that. They are places where innovation and change is seen as an opportunity for learning for all who participate in them both directly and indirectly: teachers, students, parents, professional associations, education departments and related organizations. Knowledge building schools see themselves as authentically accountable. That is, they acknowledge their ethical and social responsibilities not only in fiscal terms and in relation to previously stated outcomes, but also in relation to what actually took place. Knowledge building schools are intelligent schools whose attributes recognise corporate knowledge as well as individual knowledge (MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed, 2004). Knowledge building schools are where professional learning is the right and responsibility of all; where activist professionalism and trust are keywords (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002)

What then are the conditions that will enable the knowledge building school to flourish in a sustained and sustainable manner and take education into a future that is complex and uncertain?

**CONDITIONS SUPPORTING KNOWLEDGE BUILDING SCHOOLS:**

Schools that take seriously the notion that they can and should create professional knowledge for themselves and for others cannot be simply summoned out of the ether. They require explicit internal and external conditions that will support their development. We shall discuss these conditions in terms of: (1) leadership and the development of communicative space; (2) ethical regard including mutuality, respect and commitment; and, (3) the development of networks and partnerships.

**(1) Leadership and the development of the communicative space**

While others have researched and written extensively on issues surrounding school leadership it is our wish to emphasise particular features of leadership that contribute to the evolution of the kind of communicative space that permits sound professional knowledge building (Niemi and Kemmis, 1999; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005). Too often, the leadership literature has treated as separate and distinctive the notions of ‘leading from the front’ and ‘distributed leadership’. We learned from our studies of PASP schools that there was indeed a time and place for ‘hero’ leaders willing to take risks and create conditions that encourage the kind of experimentation so necessary for knowledge building. On the other hand, it was equally critical that opportunities for leadership were shared within a school community so ideas could be generated, tested and evaluated in a safe and professionally nurturing environment. Citing Stoll, Fink and Earl (2002), we argued that:
The formation of professional learning teams at the schools (for example) ensured that teachers’ and students’ academic and social outcomes could best be fostered by an organisational structure that recognised that, given leadership opportunities, people will behave ethically and with integrity (Groundwater-Smith & Kemmis, 2004, p. 149).

The experience of many PASP schools convinced us that what was most needed to achieve significant and sustainable educational change in schools was learning centred leadership – leadership that aimed directly to contribute to students’ learning and to the professional learning of staff. Time and again, teachers drew our attention to events and activities that made change possible precisely because leaders had opened up conversational space, among and between teachers and students, to allow previously settled ways of thinking and doing things to be ‘bracketed’, problematised, explored and unsettled – in talk and in action. Indeed, projecting from the exploration of ideas in talk to exploratory action (in action inquiry documenting change in practice in schools and classrooms) was one of the principal ways teachers and schools sowed possibilities and harvested learnings from their developing practice. Through learning centred leadership, early career teachers led by introducing new ideas into the school community and were honoured for doing so, and experienced classroom practitioners led by sharing their ideas, by mentoring and by demonstrating their practical wisdom in practice. In many PASP schools, principals and members of school executives opened opportunities for discussion and debate not only by introducing new and interesting provocations to the staff (which they frequently did), but also by creating space for others to share ideas, explore their consequences and evaluate their outcomes openly and collaboratively. Such enactments of learning centred leadership require genuine confidence and trust among those who participate in them. They require, as we have already emphasised, ethical regard, mutuality, respect and professional commitment.

(2) Ethical regard, mutuality, respect and commitment

There is a distinction to be made between ethics and rules. Relationships among staff and between staff and their students are governed, in part, by sets of rules that recognise and enact legislation, administrative procedures and the requirements of policy. Thus, for example, a teacher may not harass a new and beginning teacher on the basis of his or her race, religion or sexual preference. Behaving ethically, however, goes beyond meeting such requirements, important as they may be. Behaving ethically involves matters of moral deliberation. For example, in situations where new and beginning teachers are held in low esteem in a school simply because they are inexperienced and uncertain about particular aspects of professional practice, it is unlikely that they will feel comfortable or confident to make a contribution to debates about the school’s operation or its relationships with its students. In such situations, ways of talking and working that explicitly recognise and enact the moral value of respect for persons not only help to overcome timidity or professional anxiety, they also treat the newcomer as a genuine resource – perhaps a source of new ideas encountered in a teacher education course, or, at the very least, a new set of eyes through which current ways of working can be re-evaluated. Mutuality and respect are essential virtues for the kinds of debates that contribute to knowledge building, and the practice of mutuality and respect is essential to collective knowledge-building and critical and self-critical efforts to make changes in established ways of doing things.

Pring (2004) makes a distinction between moral virtues such as courage, kindness, generosity of spirit, honesty and a concern for justice, on the one hand, and, on the other intellectual virtues comprised of a concern to seek out the truth (as it is understood), openness to criticism, and an interest in clear communication based upon evidence (p. 145). Developing the conditions for knowledge building schools requires embedding both moral and intellectual virtues in the very fibre of the school, as central to its culture – which means, as central to its day-to-day practices of communication, work and social organisation (including the exercise of power). The practice of such moral and intellectual virtues, central to the culture of knowledge-building schools, should not only characterise relationships between teachers, but also to relationships with adults in the community beyond the school, and – of course, and most importantly – to relationships between students and teachers. Indeed, as Nel Noddings (2003) shows in her description of teaching as a caring practice, the virtue of care is central to the relationship between teachers and students, and, like the necessity for open and respectful communication between teachers and students, it is central to creating the conditions under which students best learn, grow and flourish.
While learning centred leadership and practising moral and intellectual virtues of ethical regard, mutuality, respect and commitment are in one sense ‘internal’ matters of school culture, our PASP experience shows that schools as knowledge-building communities also look outwards.

(3) Networks and partnerships

Just as someone new coming into a school can assist in making the familiar strange, so too there are benefits in opening up the knowledge and experience within a school to other schools and to other agencies. Knowledge building organizations increase their communicative space by actively engaging in networking – both in terms of knowledge networks (resources of research literatures, for example) and in terms of inter-personal and inter-agency networks (links to people and agencies that make others’ ideas and experiences available to a school). However, connecting to a multiplicity of voices beyond the school does not mean engaging with an incoherent babble of voices. The PASP experience shows us that networking as a means of developing knowledge building schools needs to be purposeful. For example, one group of nearby primary schools in PASP – known as SAIL (School Action in Liverpool) – established itself as a collective to meet on a regular basis with an academic partner to share and discuss issues and challenges they faced – many of which were shared as consequences of social conditions of disadvantage common across their district. In this case, schools’ and teachers’ familiarity with each other’s contexts assisted and encouraged them in their discussions. As we said in our report:

The portfolio reports of the schools suggest that these kinds of schools (who networked) greatly benefited from the outside advice and input that became available to them. The schools appeared not to be self conscious (let alone nervous) about opening their work and ideas to outsiders and in general to be more willing to try out new ideas and practices, and to explore and document the new ideas and practices systematically through action inquiry (Groundwater-Smith & Kemmis, 2004, p. 118).

A very different network of unalike schools has been established by the Centre for Practitioner Research at the University of Sydney. Now in its sixth year, The Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools originally comprised six schools, and has now grown to ten. The schools are widely dispersed across metropolitan Sydney, covering the government and non-government sectors, primary and secondary, wealthy and economically disadvantaged, with an agreement to share ideas for methods of practitioner inquiry particularly in relation to consulting students about their experiences of school as a source of ideas about how education in the schools might be improved (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2003). Such is the commitment of its members that the Coalition has continued to grow and thrive with no external sponsorship or funding.

In each of these cases, teacher professional learning has been extended and developed not only through knowledge building within the school, but also through developmental and educative processes which go beyond each participating school. The Coalition is an educative community that continues to extend and broaden participants’ professional lenses. As in school clusters like the SAIL group in PASP, the Coalition has increased the quantum of teacher professional knowledge available to each participating school through the experience of teachers in other schools, and also through the contributions of an academic partner.

One of the important features of the PASP was that each school should have the opportunity to work with an academic partner whose role was described in this way:

Firstly they will be key resources helping schools to document their work and learn from it through their action inquiries. Second they are likely to offer ideas about the kinds of innovations being tried. They are thus likely to be partners in the schools’ work of innovation and inquiry rather than simply ‘outside’ or ‘objective experts’ in methodology or the substantive areas in which the innovations are occurring (PASP Guiding Principles for the Evaluation of Priority Action Plans, 25th November, 2002, quoted in Groundwater-Smith & Kemmis, 2004, p. 27).

Partnerships between schools and universities are not new. For example the national Innovative Links between Schools and Universities Program (Yeatsman & Sachs, 1995) involved staff from fourteen Australian Universities connecting up with (more or less local) ‘roundtables’ or clusters of schools in almost every State and Territory. In the view of the evaluators of the Program, while much was achieved by participating schools, often the initiative tended to rest with university participants. Our
experience with PASP, with the *Coalition of Knowledge-Building Schools*, and with the Australian National Schools Network (NSN), is that these kinds of school-university partnerships have significantly matured over the years, with schools now having a much greater sense of control and agency *vis-à-vis* their university academic partners than in earlier times.

If networks and partnerships are important to the development of the knowledge building school, then it is essential that the ‘match’ between the various participants in a judicious one. In SAIL the relationships between the university and school partners were based on the shared challenge of meeting the needs of children in difficult and challenging circumstances. In the *Coalition of Knowledge Building* Schools, it was the determination to find valid and worthwhile ways to capture young people’s perceptions of their school experiences. In each case, the role of the academic partner has been one in which there is parity of esteem between that partner and the network. Our research into the establishment, building and maintenance of relationships between academic partners and schools in the PASP convinces us that merely throwing schools together, or assigning schools academic mentors without careful negotiation, is unlikely to produce a knowledge-building ethos. On the contrary, our evidence suggests that the most successful partnerships in PASP were built on shared and agreed commitments to transparency, clarity of expectations, complementarity of contributions, mutual respect, democratic participation and a willingness to renegotiate the terms of the partnership in the light of changes needs, circumstances and opportunities (For a detailed description of key features of successful partnerships in PASP, see Groundwater-Smith and Kemmis, 2004, pp.110 - 119).

We now turn to a particular feature of knowledge building schools that we believe is more frequently notable for its absence than its presence – the practice of consulting students. We discuss this more broadly in terms of responsiveness, both in the sense that schools can be more responsive than is usual to the voices of students and in the sense that education systems can be more responsive than is usual to the voices of schools and teachers.

**CREATING A RESPONSIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR AND WITHIN KNOWLEDGE BUILDING SCHOOLS**

So where on earth does one start in such a complex field? While there are many starting points we are going to select just one. That is, the notion that in order to begin to engage in mindful, carefully designed, and morally defensible teacher professional learning within a knowledge building school there is no better place to start than with the students themselves. How curious it is that consulting students is often an afterthought rather than the beginning point.

Schools exist to educate their students, but it is a curious thing that as the “consequential stakeholders” of the many decisions about the organisation of schools, curriculum and assessment practices and the like, they are rarely consulted about what happens in their classrooms, in the playground and more generally in the ways in which the purposes of schooling are discussed. As Crane (2001) indicated in her portrayal of the ‘Students as Researchers’ project at Sharnbrook Upper School and Community College in UK:

> Not only can the students come to school to learn; but they can and indeed must be an integral part of the school’s own learning. Schools cannot learn how to become better places for learning without asking the students (p.54).

Just as it essential for the development of the knowledge building school to consult with its students, treating them as partners in learning and knowledge about the conditions for good learning to occur, so too is it vital that the system itself consults its constituency – its member schools and the communities that they serve.

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2 As we were writing this paper the Sydney Morning Herald (5th/6th February) indicated that it wanted to hear from students on “The School that I’d Like”. In its background piece the Education Editor suggested that there was little or no consultation with students in schools, an observation that unfortunately has some validity.

3 This is a phrase that has long been used by the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration to describe students in schools.
Of course in writing this paper we are mindful that not all schools are the same. Going into a school is not the same as visiting a fast food outlet where the product and the means of production are standardised and controlled. As PASP recognised, local problems require local solutions. The program was based upon an understanding that social geography plays a significant part in deciding upon how schools will operate. It is to this issue that we now turn.

RECOGNISING SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY

PASP schools and teachers were given a kind of ‘permission’ to become knowledge-building schools in order to find ‘local solutions’ to their local problems. To implement and evaluate these ‘solutions’, they were given some additional funding much of which was utilised for additional staff, frequently specialist staff (for example, specialist literacy and numeracy teachers including primary teachers to assist literacy learning for junior secondary students with literacy problems, school-community liaison staff with social work training, ICT specialists, and others). They also had powerful support from the NSW Department of Education and Training and the State PASP Team who were advocates for the schools within the Department, and ‘brokers’ to a variety of kinds of expertise to support the schools in the implementation of new initiatives.

These, then, were not typical NSW schools – if there is such a thing as a ‘typical’ NSW school. They were schools confronting challenging circumstances. And most produced measurable positive outcomes in increased student learning outcomes and teacher professional learning outcomes in the single year in which we observed the Program. These are substantial achievements, and they were produced in a timescale and quantum far greater than we meta-evaluators expected. Our experience evaluating educational innovations in schools – particularly disadvantaged schools – had led us to expect that improving educational outcomes for students would be slow and the improvements small. One reason the improvements were larger than might have been expected is that a number of schools targeted their interventions towards students with the poorest educational attainments, producing improvements for this group and thus improving average attainments on measures like the Basic Skills Tests. Another reason, more important in our view, was that the Program focussed on teachers’ professional learning outcomes and on improving professional practice. PASP schools were also ‘atypical’ in the sense that they had more principals in their first appointment to a principalship, more members of school executives in their first appointment to such positions, and more teachers in the first year and first five years of teaching. Moreover, Departmental staffing practices which give additional ‘transfer points’ to teachers serving in ‘difficult to staff’ schools tend to maintain their profile of relative inexperience (though some schools in the Program had markedly bimodal staff distributions with many teachers in their first years of teaching, and many close to retirement).

In short, PASP schools may be regarded as atypical for three reasons: (a) they were given substantial additional resources and support, (b) they frequently chose their own developmental strategies that focussed on professional learning and the improvement of specific aspects of professional practice that were regarded as yielding ‘local solutions to local problems’, and (c) they were characterised by relative inexperience among teaching and executive staff.

Having declared that these three things may make PASP schools ‘atypical’, however, there seems little reason to believe that the mechanisms that actually produced improved educational outcomes for students and professional skills and morale among staff are not generalisable beyond PASP schools. To be sure, there may also have been a sense of crisis which galvanised collective action in some PASP schools, but most simply had a shared sense of needing to respond collectively to challenging circumstances. Many schools in less challenging circumstances share the latter view – that times are changing and schools, teachers and educational practices need to change in relation to new and emerging social, cultural, economic, technological and material conditions. Staff in PASP schools used this shared sense of a ‘call to action’ to work together to find, implement and evaluate responses to these challenges, but they are not alone. Other schools, like those participating in various Australian National Schools Network initiatives and the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools, similarly take the view that changing circumstances require collective responses. PASP schools were required by the Program to conduct action inquiry as part of the implementation process, documenting and
interrogating their experience and the effects of their efforts; these activities are equally characteristic of the professional practice of many other schools.

Social geography is not just an important concern for schools like those in the PASP, working in communities with deep needs. Every school has its own social geography, and every school must respond to the social, cultural, economic, technological, historical and material circumstances and conditions of its students, their families and the wider communities from which they come – and to which schools, in the end, return them after each young person’s journey through their school years. The challenging conditions PASP schools confronted may have attuned teachers more closely to those circumstances and conditions, but those conditions alone did not dictate the nature of their professional learning. Indeed, as the case of the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools shows, schools in very different circumstances make their own collaborative learning journeys as they respond to changing circumstances and conditions within and around them. Every school can and must respond to changing practices and structures in the social, cultural, economic, technological, historical and material dimensions that frame its work in relation to those dimensions in its community and the wider society.

Social geography is an important reason for schools to become knowledge building organisations – to understand the local in relation to the general or the global. Social geography is always educationally substantial – by attending to social geography, teachers and schools like those in the PASP and the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools have guided their knowledge building deliberately to learn how best to respond to the needs, circumstances and opportunities of their particular students and their families, and of their local communities. Many, perhaps most, of the PASP schools also learned – that their local efforts at knowledge building, through their action inquiry documentation and evaluation work, yielded insights not only into what worked and did not ‘work’ but how things worked.

It turns out that this has become a controversial question in some parts of the world – and increasingly in Australia. In health and in education in Britain and the United states, policy makers are increasingly interested in ‘what works’ in order to direct what health professionals and teachers do – in response, they say, to a crisis (an alleged crisis, that is) in public confidence about the quality of health care or the quality of education. In those places especially, though the trends are here in Australia too, they are turning to notion of ‘evidence-based practice’ to demand that health and educational interventions are justified by research. We turn now to consider what this means as part of our conclusion about the effectiveness of knowledge-building schools.

CONCLUSION – KNOWLEDGE BUILDING SCHOOLS: HOW DO WE KNOW THEY WORK?

In this contribution to the NSW Department of Education’s consultation document Excellence and Innovation we have asserted the strength and value of supporting schools as knowledge building organizations. We have developed our arguments both from the literature in the field, our own scholarship and the experience of conducting the meta-evaluation of the Priority Schools Action Program. Clearly, supporting schools to work in the ways which we have advocated under the conditions that we have deemed to be essential, schools need not only resources, especially time and flexibility, but also authentic accountability structures through which they can demonstrate that their learning makes a difference in the educational interests of their students.

The call for ‘evidence-based practice’ is a call by governments, policy makers and administrators for justifications that professionals are using available resources to best effect. It is also a call for teachers and other professionals to justify their practice on the grounds that it is supported by the best available research evidence. What counts as the best evidence is not an open question in the minds of many advocates of ‘evidence-based practice’, however – many advocates of evidence-based practice have a very particular view of the kind of evidence that might be regarded as compelling. Early in this paper, we cited Slavin (2002) and indicated that we would be returning to his work. He is one of a number of researchers in the United States arguing for the reinstatement of the randomised control trial as ‘the gold standard’ of scientific ‘proof’, and thus as the most appropriate way to evaluate changes in education.

We part from Slavin on evidence-based practice on the question of whether the randomised controlled trial is the source of the most reliable and valid evidence about practice. To be blunt, we
regard this as a mere assertion, based on a particular view of science, social science and educational science. It is undermined by the substantial and educationally-significant findings of a vast body of educational research that does not employ experimental (or even correlational) methods – for example, educational anthropology, much educational sociology, history or even economic research. Slavin’s position imagines that all the problems to be solved are ones of discovering what ‘interventions’ work best, in general (and not in this particular case), where what works best is measured in terms of student outcomes on common measures. It imagines that the evidence that guides good practice is to be found exclusively in books or literatures or research reports, and not in the experience and critically-examined reflection of practitioners themselves. It imagines that evidence travels across time and space, in the form of propositions, rather than in the observations of thoughtful people about what goes on in their own lives.

In different ways and to different degrees in different places, the research efforts of many teachers in many PASP schools, often helped and supported by academic partners, embraced all of the kinds of insights that experimental research does not yield. PASP teacher-researchers gathered evidence about different participants’ perspectives on their practice – for example, by responding to the student voice, by collecting the views of parents and others, and frequently by collecting and occasionally responding with surprise to each other’s views. They located their schools in place and in history, and studied how the situations of their schools came to be as they were, and how their efforts changed things for different people – and the reports they produced at the end of the first year of the program vividly showed what they changed, why, how, and with what effect. They studied the discourses they employed in understanding their work, and the possibilities of new discourses – like the discourses of ‘productive pedagogy’ and ‘quality teaching’. They explored the extent to which some school and classroom practices may have played a role in maintaining or challenging tendencies towards the reproduction of social inequalities – for example, by responding to cultural difference and improving the engagement of students in classroom work. In short, many teachers and schools collected powerful, relevant and compelling evidence about the nature and consequences of their efforts at improving education in their schools without employing – or ever needing – a single randomised controlled experiment. They used evidence, explored their work critically, considered alternative explanations, recognised practical exigencies, and worked in and through the drama that is the fluidity and dynamism of practice responding to real students in real schools in real communities.

Effectively, the PASP schools, like hundreds of schools before and since, around NSW and around the world, decided to become knowledge building organisations and they did so by gathering and reflecting critically on evidence, and by using the evidence available to inform their reasoning about what to do next. They regarded all evidence as partial and frail, as giving only a part of what we can never have and science can never give – a complete picture of the work of a school as a unified reality. They reasoned with and from evidence, they did not regard evidence as a kind of ‘proof’ that what they were doing were the best and only thing to be done.

Hundreds of journal articles, books and conference papers demonstrate the power of teacher research and practitioner knowledge, and, increasingly, the simple utility of understanding schools as knowledge-building organisations. Indeed, if we are to find the notion of evidence based practice truly useful, we would say that knowledge building schools use evidence forensically, that is to gather information from many sources and through many different means to more fully apprehend and understand what is taking place. The result is educational development for all – teachers, students and the school and its community.

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