The design of PASP: a knowledge based program

The development of the PASP and the principles that guided its development

No social institution has a greater role to play in the preparation of young people for the responsibility of becoming productive citizens in an adult world than a nation’s schools. As Thomson (2000) acknowledges schooling is strongly linked with the social and economic quality of life.

Our experiences at school help shape our senses of who we are and what we might become and provide the knowledge and credential that help us to make our hopes and aspirations into realities. … Education can be seen as a key contributor to our ‘common-wealth’. It helps to shape the kind of ‘public’ we are and become, as well as becoming the means whereby individuals make their way. (p.2)

Yet it is the case that access to the positive outcomes of schooling varies by economic circumstances, ethnicity, race and geography. Of course schools, alone, cannot ameliorate, let alone reverse the great differences between the most advantaged and the least advantaged in our society. In a world where some individuals such as Bill Gates, the President of Microsoft, have more wealth than the gross domestic product of poor nations, and others have scarcely enough to eat it is too much to hope that the provision of schooling can even up the variation. What can be asked, however, is that the state can and should address social inequalities and their impact upon the possibility of students fully benefiting from schooling.

It is said that equality of opportunity is a fundamental principle underpinning the operation of all democratic societies. Lynch & Lodge (2002) argue that it is an enshrined core value in numerous international agreements, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (p.5). They go on to assert “It is also a principle to which there is a deep commitment in education, albeit one that is often ill defined and minimally implemented” (p.5).

However, such commitment, it could be proposed, is more observed in its absence than its presence in terms of recent government polices across the globe. The many papers in Yesterday’s Dreams (Freeman-Moir & Scott, 2004) which scanned the educational landscapes of New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, South
Africa and the United States of America, and Teece’s work (2000) conducted specifically in Australia, point to a reduction in government policies directed to the moral and social principle of equality of opportunity for all in spite of the consistency of the data that tells us that localities of disadvantage have become dramatically less equal both in terms of income and employment levels. It is in this context that the New South Wales Government, spurred on by the New South Wales Teachers’ Federation (NSWTF, 2002) departed from the norm of paying less attention to matters of inequality to making a policy decision to begin to address the issue with a greater aggressiveness than has been seen for many years.

A key to the initiatives of the government is to be found in a greater understanding of the place of community in the development of such a policy. Schools that have “deep needs” are ones that are in communities that have had sustained periods of cumulative disadvantage such that community strength and wellbeing are seriously eroded. Vinson (2003) discusses such social localities in these terms: [that they are] “so concentrated in their degree of disadvantage of life opportunities ordinarily available to most people [that they] are crushed by the negative social spiral” (p.1). He later continues:

There are causal associations between poor neighbourhoods and other social problems that are more than the consequences of macroeconomic forces and individual or household characteristics. The larger and longer running the area health problems the stronger the cumulative impact becomes causing a drain on services with resultant lower quality outcomes such as educational performance, housing services and health care … 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 (Vinson, 2003, p. 56)

Following a New South Wales Government initiated Community Police and Parents Forum held in Sydney, April, 2002 it was agreed that intensive help should be delivered to schools with deep needs:

The State Government will run a 12 month trial to assist 40 New South Wales Schools affected by local community social and crime problems with funding of more than $16 million allocated over the next two financial years.

The NSW Minister for Education and Training, John Watkins, said the Priority Action Schools Program would use innovative early intervention and prevention strategies as part of a plan to provide local solutions to problems affecting local schools.

… The trial will include primary, central and high schools characterised by such indicators as:

- Poor student behaviour and attendance.
- Lower student outcomes
- High student turnover and low retention into post-compulsory schooling
- Students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds.

… Mr Watkins said the key feature of the trial would be flexibility at the local level to tailor a plan appropriate to their school. Options available to schools will include:
• Reduced class-teaching time for senior staff to give them more time to mentor and support staff and students.
• School based training programs for teachers, students and parents in areas such as conflict resolution and behaviour management.
• Increased assistance in basic life skills where hygiene, nutrition and health are issues of concern.
• Intensive literacy and numeracy support programs such as Reading Recovery and Count Me In.
• Specialist assistance from non-teaching professionals such as nurses, social workers or welfare workers.
• Smaller class sizes and other alternative staffing models such as team teaching.
• Specialist teachers and other staff in areas such as behaviour management, special education and counselling.
• Greater use of crime prevention strategies such as Crime Prevention Workshops to be supported by local police.
• Close co operations with local TAFEs to provide targeted education assistance for young people at risk, especially for students in the 15 – 19 age group.
• Capital expenditure to support new initiatives.
• Reduced teaching loads for new teachers and their supervisors.
• Mentoring of students by local community leaders. (NSW Ministry of Education, Press Release, June 4th 2002)

Thus the Priority Action Schools Program, as a significant equity program was conceived of and launched. Its objectives were to support schools to build their capacity to:
• Improve students’ educational outcomes
• Improve student behaviour and attendance,
• Support teachers through mentoring and induction programs.
• Support whole school approaches to improved teaching practice.
• Reduce high student turnover and increase retention to complete schooling.
• Reduce the impacts of socio-economic disadvantage.
• Maximise interagency and community support. (NSW DET Initial briefing to District Superintendents and Teachers’ Federation Organisers, 9th August, 2002).

Importantly, the Program was seen as the embodiment of a partnership between the state’s education employing authority and the teachers’ union. Thus there was a recognition of the intersection of a number of professional and industrial concerns. Schools choosing solutions that took them beyond the normal regulatory frameworks in areas such as staffing, could do so in the knowledge that they would be supported by both parties.
Finally, there is a feature of the Program that makes it particularly distinctive; that is, the insistence that the PASP is a knowledge based program. Its design with inbuilt evaluation, both internal and external, places an emphasis upon the learnings that the Program will produce: learning about what happens in schools as well as what happens in systems as complex and diverse as the New South Wales Department of Education and Training.

3.1 The selection of the PASP schools

It will be noted from the Minister’s press advice quoted above that the original proposal was to assist forty schools. Professor Andrew Gonzci, Dean of Education at the University of Technology, Sydney and Dr Don Weatherburn, of the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research were requested to undertake an audit to identify the schools to be included in the trial. Following negotiation and discussion it was decided to extend the number of schools to seventy (eventually to be seventy four).

Criteria for inclusion would be low socio-economic status (derived from the Priority Schools Funding Program survey of the SES characteristics of schools and families of students at schools undertaken in 2000) combined with data surrounding student behaviour and attendance, student learning outcomes, student turnover and retention, the number/percentage of beginning teachers (less than three years experience). Also considered was the degree to which schooling was impacted by the location within low SES public housing estates. An enrolment threshold of 160 students was used to ensure that the funds targeted significant numbers of students in each location (NSWTF PASP Overview, August, 2002, pp. 2-3).

A meeting was convened with District Superintendents and Teachers’ Federation Organisers to consider the draft list. It was thought that their local knowledge would be invaluable in ratifying or modifying the selection. Consideration was given to such matters as linkages between feeder primary schools and secondary schools and particular pockets of concentrated disadvantage.

Clearly the selection process was a complex one. In order to confirm our reading of the processes we asked for a response from the Department of Education and Training.

The Superintendent of Schools, leading the Program 2002 - 2003 indicated that the selection process in August 2002 was as follows:

Schools were identified and asked to participate on the basis of a combination of criteria including: level of disadvantage, enrolment, number of beginning teachers, suspension, attendance and learning achievement levels. Professional judgement and knowledge of local needs was incorporated through advice from district superintendents and NSW Teachers' Federation organisers (Briefing note, August, 2002).
3.2 The submission process

Having been identified, schools were invited to participate. These invitations were couched as “expressions of interest”. Once schools had confirmed that they would wish to be included in the Program, and they all did, they then were asked to develop a proposal. The expression of interest was required to set out, in no more than two pages, the given school’s priorities, and the strategies and resources that were envisaged being necessary to achieve those priorities.

The principles to be observed in these submissions were clearly set out:

- Submissions and strategies contained therein must align with the PASP program objectives and have a whole school focus rather than being a series of discrete strategies.
- Strategies must incorporate elements of innovation and sustainability.
- Strategies must have a component for professional learning which will build capacity within the school community for ongoing development.
- Strategies must align with the DET policy framework.
- Targets must be specific, measurable and aligned to benchmark data.
- Evaluation must align with the strategies in the plan and contain a component of external validation.
- There needs to be coherence between the school context, overall plan and the evaluation.
- Submissions are considered within the local context.
- Innovation is defined for the purposes of the program as being the implementation of a process, strategy or program which has not been trialled in the school previously.
- Sustainability is created through increased capacity of teachers in the school through mentoring, reflection and professional dialogue, increased understanding of leadership roles, the creation of professional knowledge through practitioner research and evaluation, the production of resources which can be used beyond the immediate timeframe and strengthening links with and participation of the community.

At the time the expressions of interest were considered there was a team of Program officers including a District Superintendent, two Chief Education Officers, a Principal Education Officer, and a senior Teachers’ Federation organiser, seconded part time for the Program’s duration to the Department of Education and Training. Each was allocated a number of schools with whom they would work, offering advice and responding to requests for further information. In the latter part of third term 2002, schools were supported in refining their expressions of interest. A number of local facilitators who knew the schools and their communities provided an additional level of support to assist the schools and the state PASP team in refining schools’ expressions of interest.
3.3 Schools’ initial action plans

In developing their action plans, schools were required to establish a team including a PASP coordinator, the school’s NSW Teachers’ Federation representative and a community representative. In their action plans schools should nominate: their key outcomes in priority order; the targets they had set themselves; the personnel who would be involved in realising their goals; and, the strategies to be employed for evaluating their effectiveness. A template was provided by the PASP team. Action plans were electronically submitted for approval to the Program leader at the end of September. Thus there were only six weeks between when the Program was announced and the time the initial plans were in place.

Any further refinement came about as the Program officers closely examined the plans both for their alignment with Program objectives and their costing. Schools were unaccustomed to estimating the cost of personnel and did not always take account of the on-costs that they would incur.

Schools were further advised that they would need to set aside approximately 5% of their budget, which ranged from $100,000 to $400,000 per school, to assist them with their in-house evaluation and provide consultancy advice, some of which would be provided by an academic partner.

3.4 Guiding principles for school-based evaluation

The evaluation of the work undertaken by the schools in realising the objectives of the Priority Actions Schools Program was to be guided by a set of principles underpinned by a number of assumptions.

1. That an action inquiry model that requires schools to gather evidence, which will both inform their strategic change and document the impact of the change, is a powerful means for enhancing school development.
2. That local ‘solutions’ are more likely to meet local challenges than a ‘one size fits all’ model.
3. That schools should be clear and specific regarding their goals and strategies and that they will be accountable for the development of local projects through the adoption of an evaluation mechanism.
4. That schools will be supported by the formation of partnerships with academics in the higher education sector or external critical friends who will act as advisers and mentors in relation to both the strategies and the evidence which is collected.
5. That professional learning will result from action inquiry: within the classroom, within the school; and between schools in the system.
6. That innovations will build capacity and be sustained beyond the initial implementation of the Program (PASP Guiding Principles for the Evaluation of Priority Action Plans, 25th November, 2002).
In sum, the key questions which the schools would address were:

- What did we learn as a result of our innovation?
- What effect has our innovation had upon student outcomes?

For many schools the evaluation requirements were of a more demanding nature than that to which they had been accustomed. It was clear from the guidelines that the evaluation was grounded in a learning rather than an accountability model. Of course, schools were expected to be able to provide proper evidence of spending, but more importantly they were also to be required to indicate what had been learned by all who had participated in the Program: students, teachers, principals, members of schools’ executives and community members.

### 3.5 Academic partners

Just as it was a departure from normal practice for the schools to engage in sustained evaluation based upon a range and variety of evidence, so too was it a challenge for them to collaborate with an academic partner. Some schools had already developed associations with university colleagues. For example, a number of primary schools had been working with the University of Western Sydney in such projects as *The Fair Go Project*, under the auspices of the Priority Schools Funding Program (Johnson & O’Brien, 2002). Others had developed relationships with academics from Newcastle University and the University of Technology, Sydney in relation to the Productive Pedagogies initiative (Hayes, Lingard & Mills, 2000). But for many schools their contact with universities had been limited to supporting students in the practicum, or through their own undergraduate or postgraduate studies. Reciprocally, many academics had only had a limited contact with schools in recent years. In Chapter 6 we shall discuss the specific challenges that arose from the development of these partnerships. Suffice, here, to say that academic partners were seen to fulfil two roles:

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)

### 3.6 The meta-evaluation

As the team progressed in the design of the PASP it became clear that the knowledge produced by individual schools would need to be aggregated into overall Program knowledge. That would require a meta-evaluation whose task would be one of synthesis and deeper investigation in order to develop Program wide learnings.

In their proposal to the team Professors Kemmis and Groundwater-Smith indicated that:
The key questions for the meta-evaluation would be:

- What have schools learned?
- What changes have occurred, both in terms of operational factors and enhanced understanding of student needs?
- What are the indicators for successful projects, and what indicators are most appropriate in assessing the success of different kinds of strategies in the short term (within the year of the project), medium term (one to five years after the project) and long term (beyond five years)?
- What have been the costs and benefits of the project at local and State levels?
- What level of District, State and academic assistance is required to facilitate projects of this kind?

As already indicated, the purpose of the meta-evaluation was to gather, collate and interpret the evidence from the local projects in order to develop ‘lateral’ and ‘vertical’, sustainable, systems-wide learning regarding the knowledge being built by schools.

Overall, the proposed meta-evaluation would attend to both quantitative and qualitative outcomes. Like all sound evaluation strategies, the meta-evaluation that was proposed would not be undertaken only at the end of the Program, but would be embedded throughout its development.

A number of inquiry strategies would be employed, these being a series of Forums; case studies; perspectives of key stakeholders; and engagement in critical moments during the trial year.

An initial Forum would be conducted during January, 2003, with the academic associates who have been seen as an essential feature of the project. This Forum would assist in developing an agreed framework for school learning portfolios and as an opportunity to clarify roles and responsibilities.

During the year there would be two state-wide school Forums, the first of these to familiarise the schools with notions of evidence based practice and the development of school learning portfolios. During Term 4, a second Forum would be held where schools would present their learnings in a portfolio using a set of organisers which have been agreed by all participants. A roundtable format would be adopted in order that critical professional learnings could be shared and critiqued. The portfolios were to be a source of evidence for the meta-evaluation.

Case studies
Student voice

In order to ensure that the voice of the consequential stakeholders, the students, is made prominent in the meta-evaluation, workshops would be conducted with a

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1 As a responsive evaluation it was important that the design have some flexibility. Some of the early proposals, for example, a series of regional Forums, were modified on the basis of both cost and time. The plan set out here is the plan that was enacted.
participating school to enable it to engage students more directly in the local inquiry. These workshops and their outcomes would form a small case study within the larger project.

Productive pedagogies
A number of schools had proposed using a productive pedagogies framework among the key strategies they aimed to explore. The Department of Education and Training at the time of the trial was formulating a policy in this area. Case studies produced cooperatively with these schools would both inform the meta-evaluation and the emerging policy.

University partnerships
Using academic consultants is an increasing strategy in the implementation of action inquiry projects (cf. Cuttance, 2001). The meta-evaluation would investigate the conditions which enhance such partnerships and those matters which may act as impediments.

Perspectives of key stakeholders:
Broadly based focus group interviews would be conducted with key stakeholders regarding the overall Program’s structures and strategies. These would include: Departmental Officers, School Personnel, and Academic Associates. Focus groups would allow for interactions between the different stakeholders and permit varying points of view to emerge and be honoured. It is expected that a number of these interviews would take place in Term 3, although other interviews would be held throughout the project as need and opportunity dictate.

Site Visits
While not initially considered in the plan, other than in the context of the case studies, it became clear during the pilot year that site visits should be undertaken in order to both discuss, with the schools, their plans in action, and to observe the role played by the PASP team acting as advisers and consultants.

It is clear that the PASP is a complex, multi-layered intervention designed to address the challenges faced by schools with deep needs. This chapter has provided evidence that the processes that were adopted to develop the Program as one that is knowledge based have been carefully tailored to ensure that at one and the same time it has been possible to develop local solutions to local problems as well as fit within a learning framework that will permit the accumulation of results.

The chapter which follows will portray ways in which the various Forums, were conducted and the training provided to participants with respect to gathering and reporting upon evidence.

References

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2 Each case study was undertaken and results are to be found in the body of the report in Chapters 5 and 6.


