

# **Report of the 2007 ANSN National Forum: *People Working in Schools in Challenging Circumstances***

by Andrew Bills, ANSN Networker for South Australia

*'We've had 30 years of learning what doesn't work. We've had 30 years of learning, you know, and a few hundred before that, of course, but in particular in the last 30 or so years, we've had very strategic things to say.*

*We do know a lot about things that do work, but mostly what gets in the way is they are not sustainable because we're doing them as pimples on the pumpkins. So we've got to grab the core resources and actually make them work for us. That's why we have to have the government departments at the table with us, because they've got the core resources. But we've got to use them differently.'*

Brennan, M, Closing address,  
ANSN National Forum, August 2007

With these insightful and sobering words, Professor Marie Brennan from the University of South Australia captured the enormity of the educational challenge that currently faces educators who seek educationally just change in Australia. At the recent ANSN National forum, held in Adelaide at the University of South Australia, Marie foregrounded this challenge as part of a theme that arose throughout the day in both the formal presentations and the group discussions.

At its very essence, the argument went like this – we have to do things differently because to continue to operate in the same way will lead nowhere. So, what must we do to capture the public's imagination and to impact upon the political landscape? The forum closed with this challenge but it was clear that the thinking about how to proceed in new strategic ways had only just begun. We need to address a number of questions, including the following.

- How can the ANSN become involved more strategically in moving the national and state education agendas in a direction that will have positive benefits for public education across the country?
- How can the pedagogical challenge presented by Rob Hattam in his paper, *Thinking past disadvantage in education*, or the complexity of effecting whole school reform that has emanated from Debra Hayes' 'Align' project, be taken up by the ANSN in strategic ways that have public and political effect?
- How can the new school design agenda (presented by Big Picture Company Australia), and an innovative university teacher training paradigm that better prepares aspiring teachers for work in disadvantaged school communities (led out of the University of Western Sydney), be understood within the big challenge frame changing schools in challenging times?

Marie Brennan's closing address stirred the forum's participants into thinking

about the inability of the socially just education fraternity over the last 30 years to make significant inroads into national educational policy. Perhaps this is an appropriate way to set the scene for capturing the key conversations of the day.

*'We have to do things smarter, we have to be more strategic', she said.*

So what was it, in the forum's discussions and the presentations that ensued, that can offer an aligned and effective strategic way forward, in the currently complex and oppressive educational landscape? What key strategic themes arose from the presentations and discussions of the day? Marie summarised the importance of identifying the key themes as follows.

*'So one of the things I said in our little group (among too many things, I'm very sorry to my colleagues there), was that we've actually got to name the rules that get in the bloody way of doing anything sensible, and they're not just the employers' rules, they're also the union rules, and that's really scary to do, because they've actually worked in mirror images, and they capture the whole territory, but it ain't the whole territory anymore. We've got to put some other things on.*

*So I'm thinking that there are several kinds of strategies that we need to work on, and one is to start aggregating and learning from the tactics that we're building, and share in the tactics, but they're only useful if we've actually got an agreed set of strategies. I'm suggesting that there are several kinds of strategies that we need to think about ... we need ANSN, the Australian National Schools Network.'*

(Brennan, M, 2007)

This report is written looking through a lens that focuses on strategic social justice change. Throughout the day, forum participants clearly articulated a sense of urgency to voice educational concerns and aspirations that can take hold of the public imagination and influence the political landscape. This paper will pick up on these hot topics and themes and then conclude with a summary of the suggested strategic ways forward.

## **Rob Hattam – *Thinking past disadvantage in education* – the RPiN project (University of SA), an ARC-funded research project**

### ***The problem***

Rather than advance a theory of complexity to account for socio-cultural and political-economic factors, Associate Professor Rob Hattam argued that Federal schooling policy has developed out of theories that aim to fix up individual deficits that are unabashedly about blaming the victim (Luke, 1997; Lingard, 1998)

### ***The RPiN project logic***

In thinking beyond disadvantage, Rob presented the RPiN project as offering a response to an urgent need for curriculum and pedagogical development, as *'an antidote to alienation in the middle years, when too many people drop out, drift out or are excluded from schooling'* (Smyth & Hattam, 2004).

Rob said that the RPiN project has been researching ways in which teachers are morally and pedagogically responsive to extreme socio-cultural conditions and, especially, to the ways in which they work against the cultural stratification of schooling, which is systemic and in which working class children still receive a reduced and intellectually inferior curriculum compared with their wealthier peers.

### **Strategic ways forward**

According to Rob, the RPiN project had demonstrated that in the present difficult context it is still possible for teachers to:

- develop and sustain professional learning communities that enable teacher inquiry into reinvigorating curriculum and pedagogy in the middle years; and
- support teachers to research their students as people and learners and to aim for substantial quality improvements in student work, and provide a range of resources to assist in the success of research projects and curriculum work.

However, systemic support is needed that will

- help build collaborative professional learning communities;
- examine how teachers can make use of ethnographic knowledge in their teaching, using action research; and
- continue to advance the conceptual theorisations or imaginings of the teacher-as-researcher.

Rob finished his presentation by stating that we must 'have a go' at defining some pedagogical principles that enable some methodological decisions to be made. And our attempts must include teachers.

### **Associate Professor Deb Hayes (University of Sydney): *The ALIGN Project in NSW – an ARC funded research project***

#### ***The challenge***

How do you work with schools operating in challenging circumstances to develop more desirable and effective ways of supporting the learning of both students and teachers? The ALIGN project has focused on four schools in NSW that all receive equity-based funding due to their socio-economic profile. The project has sought to align school purpose with school effect and school practice, with an emphasis on getting real about practice. The project has recognised that schools, regional teams and state programs are all key sites of practice and that school practice is embedded/connected/constrained/facilitated by regional and state policies and actions.

The project has sought to work closely with the principals of the four schools to conceptualise their role as having a critical pedagogical purpose, rather than just a managerial one. According to Debra, the project has sought to invite schools to be engaged in sustained inquiry but, for some schools, valuing the inquiry process and seeing the need for inquiry has been difficult.

*'How do you move this forward and how do we short circuit the blame approach that is so endemic in many schools?', she asked.*

#### ***What the project did***

The project provided recounts to schools of whole days in which the researchers followed a class and used plain recount: Debra commented as follows.

*'They are disturbing documents!!! I would feel angry about the blaming of kids that went on in these schools and their assessment of what is possible. These schools require new logics and new scripts for these kids.'*

### ***The challenge and possible strategic ways forward***

Debra posed the following challenge question.

*'How can we develop new logics for teachers and principals and how can we also support them to use 'better practices' that they know about but feel they cannot use in the current situation?'*

Debra then suggested that

*'we need to work with teachers in their contexts, to try and imagine what can be done and highlight the need for sufficient support and resources to imagine what is possible.'*

### **Viv White and Panel – a Big Picture Company (BPC) Australia Presentation**

- relating to Big Picture Inspired Schools in Tasmania (Prospect High and Rosetta High), Queensland (Woodridge High School) and WA (Yule Brook College)

Viv White, Director of BPC Australia, in her introductory comments, said she followed a BPC interest to Adelaide with the hope of seeing a “from-the-ground-up” BPC school in 2009. She then introduced the BPC panel, consisting of representatives from three schools that are embracing and trialing big picture company ideas. Viv described them as ‘BPC inspired schools’.

Viv’s goal is to see one BPC school in Australia operating 5 days a week with design features that include:

- one teacher to 15 kids
- advisors
- every student on a learning plan
- adult world immersion and
- all students involved in internships.

This is clearly drawing near, she argued.

#### ***School testimony 1***

Paul Billing, Principal of Yule Brook College in Perth described how there was ‘an energy’ within the staff to do things differently.

*'With a difficult school context, marked by regular fights and violence and poor academic results, there was no issue around doing things differently', Paul said.*

Yule Brook offered professional development for three teachers, to see BPC schools in action in the US, and embraced a comprehensive range of innovative school practices, including restorative justice and assessment by exhibition. The school carefully developed a BPC model in Year 8 – to be grown throughout the school in the years ahead.

There had been significant school turnaround in the middle school years and positive community interest in the programs since the BPC inspired reform work began.

#### ***School testimony 2***

Julie Arnold, a SOSE Co-ordinator at Woodridge HS in Queensland, spoke about the ‘joy’ that comes from having conversations with students involved in internships and exhibitions, which she described as a powerful way for kids to be accountable and listened to.

*'The 45 minute conversations were quite mind-blowing. It has changed my focus, to what kids can do, rather than what they can't do.'*

### **School testimony 3**

The Tasmanian contingent, represented by teacher Marianne Olsen and Year 9 student Aaron Bowerman from Prospect High School, spoke about the positive impact of the BPC internships upon student engagement and referred to a flow-on effect, where there has been a noticeable reduction in suspensions at the school. By relating curriculum back to community and overcoming initial structural timetable difficulties, students involved in the BPC internship program are discovering a new interest in schooling. Aaron explained how his internship in the electrical trades had given him

*'learning in how to interact with adults ... I couldn't do that before.'*

### **A BPC school within the new SA Super school agenda**

Nigel Howard, a Deputy Principal at Enfield High School in Adelaide's northern suburbs, described his teaching life as one of creating new alternative programs for the kids that schools keep failing.

He highlighted the value of school smallness, seeing this as an enabler rather than a hindrance, providing curriculum-based opportunities for teachers and students within the community and, through a BPC school, the provision of aspirational programs that can

*'lift up the kids our schools have failed within their community, the TAFE and University rather than the current alternative program mix that kids 'fall into' and which are often not sustainable in the long term'.*

### **Prof Margaret Vickers and Dr Tania Ferfolja (UWS), on Reforming teacher education: Classmates program and the Refugee Action Support Partnership**

#### **Teacher training innovation**

Professor Margaret Vickers spoke about a new paradigm in teacher training, which has been trialed at the University of Western Sydney (UWS), encompassing two programs: the Refugee Action Support Partnership; and the Classmates program.

Margaret said *'we are disrupting standard professional training and trying something new.'* It was clear that this program had socially just intent and impact.

Margaret's colleague, Dr Tania Ferfolja, explained that the Classmates Program and the Refugee Action Support Partnership were joint efforts between schools and the University, to prepare teachers better for graduate placement in the hard-to-staff schools.

#### **Student teachers acquiring capital**

She said that students were placed in these schools for a comprehensive 16 week block, after meeting eligibility requirements through a rigorous interview process. According to Tania, this extended placement time gave university students the opportunity to:

- establish a different pattern of relationships within the school;
- be able to get to know the kids, the teachers and the community; and

- take responsibility for some of the emerging issues at their placement school.

Tania said students were confronted with immediate links between educational theory and practice and were experimenting with the implementation of theory into practice.

### ***Stakeholder challenges***

Margaret then detailed the systemic blocks that needed to be navigated in order to ensure the paradigm remained viable. The time involved in doing this networking, to achieve support from stakeholders including the union, was considerable.

### **Summary of strategies for moving the agenda forward: *What then must we do?***

Below is a summary of the suggested 'moving forward' strategies, from the various groups. It is clearly not an exhaustive list and perhaps best represents the initial stages of thinking that can offer a basis for further thinking, discussion and strategic development.

- Create partnerships/relationships and spaces for working differently.
- Develop strategic alliances using new technologies and offering forums to develop more connections
- Develop aligned collaboration, which means finding people in unions, departments, universities, philanthropies and schools who are ready to commit to common goals and common programs. This can be done by:
  - having the full backing of the ANSN and using the networking opportunities created by being in the network
  - using the multi-stakeholder structure to come in behind particular projects and then document/video and market them
- Keep it simple – build relationships – ask what are the fundamentals? How do you put relationships at the centre? Not literacy scores and attendance statistics.
- Challenge how we can develop new logics – how teachers can be supported to use better practices, which they know about but feel they cannot use in their current school contexts
- Use the networking resources and capital of the ANSN and do more networking.
- Pursue more strategic alliances and partnerships.
- Focus on more ANSN awareness raising
- Open the eyes of the masses to the endemic problems in many of our schools
- Consider the ANSN website strategy – there are 26 things happening – 26 needs to be pulled into 6.
- Frame up six BIG questions in relation to our strategic purpose and approach.
- Have a go at defining some pedagogical principles that enable some methodological decisions to be made in our schools and involve teachers nationally in this process.

## Conclusion

The general thrust of the forum's presentations and discussions suggested that socially just educational reform needs to focus on ways to help teachers improve instruction from the inside out, instead of decreeing change by remote control, and that reformers must keep in mind the democratic purposes that guide public education.

The forum also clearly highlighted the importance of the ANSN as an organisation that has significant resources (currently under-utilised) at its disposal, to work towards a fairer deal for the disadvantaged – as the only national education network with a social justice mantra in the country today. But simple answers to the big questions put up at the forum proved difficult – the issues are complex and the ways to address them are multi-layered, with educational, political and social dimensions.

At this juncture, it is fitting perhaps to remember that the ANSN began as a not for profit organisation back in 1999, evolving out of the Disadvantaged Schools Program. Coincidentally, this was at the same time as Garth Boomer coined the phrase 'the radical-pragmatic teacher' – indicating a way of working that would help transform the education systems, in order to help all of our students succeed. According to Garth, radical-pragmatic teachers are:

*'people who can read their world critically and with subtlety, who can act individually and collectively to defend themselves and change things, and who can have a highly developed drive to bring about higher levels of justice and democracy in society.'*

(Boomer, 1999, p.53)

Garth's words are especially relevant today, not just for teachers but for the ANSN (and the educators present at the forum), to exercise in these very challenging times a radical-pragmatic mindset, to seek out collectively a better deal for those people who currently do not have access to the same opportunities as the privileged 'others'.