

Changing Schools in Changing Times

Stabilising and sustaining change in communities experiencing adverse conditions



Description of the field work 2006

Information for participants

Update on research

We have now completed two cycles of research in all four schools. A cycle begins with a **Planning meeting** between the school leaders and members of the research team. At these meetings, changes and developments within the school and in the direction of the research are discussed, and plans for the next field visit are negotiated and organised.

The core of each cycle is the **Field work** which includes shadowing one class for one day each visit, conducting a focus group with a small group of students in this class, conducting a focus group with and/or interviewing a small group of parents of students in the class that we shadow, interviews with the teachers of the class shadowed and interviews with other teachers, the senior executive, head teachers and other school-based personnel.

The final part of the each cycle is a **Feedback session** during which each school has the opportunity to listen to a report on the fieldwork and to engage in reflective dialogue with the researchers and critical friends about what is being learnt about how the school works, and what works within the school to improve student learning and teachers' professional learning. Most importantly, we jointly identify evidence of improvement in students' work, teachers' practices and leadership practices that will be examined during the next cycle.

As the research has progressed, we have adapted our approach to the field work in an ongoing effort to better address the purpose of our research, namely to investigate how to design and sustain improvements in student learning and teacher professional learning in communities that experience severe social dislocation and educational disadvantage.

What we plan to do in 2006

In 2006, we will repeat two more research cycles in each school with a stronger focus on the classroom observations component. We want to focus more on what is happening in classrooms because educational research consistently emphasises that what matters most in schools happens in classrooms. We also believe that if we are to thoroughly investigate the efforts of the participating schools to bring about improvements in student and teacher learning we need a way of examining what is going on in classrooms. But this is not a straightforward task since classrooms are complex spaces and what happens within them can be easily misinterpreted or lost in translation.

During the first year of the study, the planning meetings and feedback sessions provided opportunities for ongoing dialogue within the research about the nature and effects of reform efforts in each school. We would now like to open up conversations about what is happening in classrooms. For this reason we will undertake the observations in collaboration with participants, and in ways that shed light on what is going on, and why. This requires that we involve teachers in helping us interpret their classroom practices, and students in helping us interpret what they experience in these classrooms.

To facilitate this process, a team of observers will shadow a Year 8 class for one day during each cycle. The team will be composed of a member of the research team, an observer nominated by the school, and an external independent experienced classroom observer. Each observer will write a brief description of each class in terms of the kinds of teaching and learning they perceive to be taking place. We do not expect the observers to be objective, indeed we have chosen them because of the different perspectives they will bring to the task. However, they will adopt, as much as is possible, a perspective that emphasises description over interpretation and analysis.

The task of interpreting and analysing what is taking place, and why, will be undertaken in collaboration with the teachers and observers involved during follow-up meetings. These meetings will be facilitated by Ann King (former principal Ashfield BHS) who is an adviser to the research project. The meetings will be scheduled the day after the observation and will last for approximately 40-60 minutes. Casual relief will be made available to the school to facilitate the participation of teachers in these meetings.

We do not intend to intervene in teachers' classroom practices, or to suggest changes, rather we hope that teachers will help us to understand their professional choices and pedagogical approaches within the context of the school.

Our goal is to co-construct a written description of each class that has meaning within the context of the school, and is accepted as an authentic representation by those whose practices it describes. Our purpose is to create a text that forms the basis of further reflection and analysis on how to design and sustain improvements in student learning and teacher professional learning in communities that experience severe social dislocation and educational disadvantage. This text will be an account of what was attempted, what was achieved, and what was considered to be possible within the context of the school and in terms of teaching and learning.

It will also provide a mechanism for making the concerns of teachers and the experiences of students more prominent within the data collection.

While the presence of three visitors will undoubtedly influence the classrooms being observed, we suspect that what is being taught and learnt will remain fundamentally the same. Our fieldwork in the first year highlighted that variations in routines are common place in high schools, and that students are familiar with adults, other than the teacher, being present in classrooms.

There is no frame of correctness against which we are attempting to judge or evaluate classroom practices. Our hope is that detailed descriptions of classrooms will assist school leaders and teachers to better understand the unique local context of learning and teaching in which they work.

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