

1992

The national schools project at Belmont Senior High School: a formative review of the first nine months

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Chadbourne, R. (1992). *The national schools project at Belmont Senior High School: a formative review of the first nine months*. Perth, Australia: Edith Cowan University.

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**THE NATIONAL SCHOOLS PROJECT
at
BELMONT SENIOR HIGH**

A Formative Review of the First Nine Months



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CONTEXT

This report reviews the first nine months of the National Schools Project (NSP) at Belmont Senior High - that is, from October 1991 to June 1992. It does not attempt to evaluate the project in terms of outcomes; instead, it examines some of the factors and issues related to the way the project was established and has developed. As such it helps illuminate the type of progress that has been made and the direction the NSP seems to be taking at Belmont.

Material for the review was collected from documents provided by the school and from interviews with thirteen staff, nine of whom were members of the project committee. This report was then written and circulated for comment to the people interviewed. Most replied by saying that "no changes are required" and "you have got it right." A few said the report is a bit "pessimistic" and questioned some of the statements made; these responses are quoted verbatim throughout the review in the form of italicized footnotes.

Of the seven Western Australian schools in the National Schools Project, Belmont Senior High is the only one that participated in the Managing Change in Schools (MCIS) project conducted in this state between 1988 and 1989. The MCIS project also involved seven schools and was a forerunner of the NSP. At Belmont, the NSP is simply known as the National Project or the project.

To some extent, the NSP at Belmont has been shaped, constrained and perhaps even compromised by the culture of the school. Not that the influence is one way because the project, in turn, has helped to reshape the school's culture. As in other organisations, the culture of the school does not stand still; it is continually evolving. The same applies to individuals. In the words of one teacher:

The biggest thing we have to face is the changing of attitudes and old ways, and I include myself in that because I am a traditionalist and I have to come to terms with that, but I hope in my own mind I am open minded enough to give innovation a chance. We can not tread in yesterday's water again, we've got to go with the flow. But we've got to manage that flow. I do not want to see my teachers swamped again.

To make sense of what is happening, then, it is necessary to briefly outline some of the traditions that are part of the culture within which the NSP operates at Belmont.

A CHANGE OF ETHOS

Belmont Senior High School opened in 1957, 35 years ago. Set in a working class area it gained a reputation for being a 'tough' school. Over the years, that image has changed, largely because of two factors: the physical rebuilding of the school between 1980-89 and a series of educational innovations. According to one long serving staff member:

Belmont did not always have a good reputation. In fact it had a fairly difficult background in discipline. Long before I started, two deputy principals were appointed to control discipline in the school. I can look back and see a whole change in the ethos of the school. That came with the rebuilding of the school, with getting some very nice buildings for the kids to be in. We would have up to 26 out of 65 staff transferring out. That's greatly reduced now. Only one teacher applied for a transfer last year. That says something about the ethos of the school. People said, "If things are going to get better it will only come from us" Belmont is now a good place to try these (NSP) things.

The school today has approximately 940 students, 70 teaching staff, and 14 ancillary and support staff.

INNOVATION

During the past decade, Belmont has come to regard itself as being fairly innovative - and for good reason. In recent years it has established and participated in a wide range of programs and projects concerned with:

- academic extension
- alternative upper school
- student/industry links
- teacher/industry links
- goal setting
- managing student behaviour
- managing change in schools
- student centred learning
- active learning
- the quality of teaching and learning

While on the surface this list of innovations looks quite substantial the reality behind the image may be less certain. Some staff tempered their enthusiasm for an unqualified acceptance of the "progressive profile" with comments such as:

We were running around like headless chooks One criticism was that we were taking on far too much too quickly. Change was coming too rapidly for absorption into the system.

The osmosis process wasn't working. We were being inundated. Principals were seen as thinking that unless the school was seen to be up and doing things then we'd get the reputation we were falling behind.

Belmont is innovative but not as dramatically as people say. The school was dropped into lots of things by previous principals. We seemed to continually take on new things, not because the staff want to take them on. One principal was known as Biggles because he was prepared to pilot anything A lot was the result of the new buildings, of change in a physical sense. Most of what we do is what we've done for years and years but we're just doing it in new buildings and not even in a different way, but it's seen elsewhere as innovation For the past few years, the staff went along with innovations because they felt it's a fait accompli, it's happening. They went along because they felt they had no option. Over the last year, however, the staff have started to say, "Hang on, perhaps I do have an option and can voice an opinion and say we shouldn't be doing this."

While these comments convey a fairly strong feeling among staff, not everyone shared the view that the administration operated on the basis of managerial prerogative. For example:

In my time at Belmont, one deputy principal in particular went to great lengths to ensure that decision making processes were fair and democratic.

UNIONISM

Belmont has developed a tradition of strong unionism among its teachers which becomes activated when industrial working conditions are considered to be under attack. According to one observer:

Most staff at Belmont are members of the Teachers Union. Only a handful are not. The Union membership at Belmont has a core of very strong and dedicated people. When the big hot issues have come up the Union has been fairly unanimous in how it has moved. The members come out of the woodwork and they speak with one voice.

Most struggles have focussed on industrial matters, not educational issues. As one member said, "The Union doesn't see itself as having an educational watchdog role." Over the past decade, the Union membership

at Belmont has battled against the school administration⁰ and the Ministry in order to:

- shift to Canning College during dusty, demolition times while the school was being rebuilt
- avoid using the old building on the Abernathy Rd site because of the asbestos problem
- protect teachers' DOTT time
- keep the lid on class sizes
- not attend staff meetings outside of school hours
- ensure proper use of the withdrawal room
- pay teachers for taking relief classes
- stop unacceptable changes to the length of lunch hours and teaching periods
- prevent a MCIS proposal to install four level one managers who would replace the then current structure of two deputy principals and a senior staff member working on the timetable almost full time.

Success on the industrial battlefield came at a price. One casualty was the maintenance of democratic decision making, a policy for which the State School Teachers Union campaigned during the 1970's and 80's. Comments from a range of people suggest that the struggles between the Union and Administration in some quarters of the school sapped energy, exhausted goodwill and eroded trust.

Staff at Belmont are not more unionist. There's just more cause because more times our conditions have been threatened.

In the past, a lot of decisions made in the school have been top down, which produced a lot of fighting. The Union went into opposition but didn't have it easy. It didn't have 100% support. Therefore the unionists become exhausted.

⁰- I recoil a little when reading that the staff had to battle against the Ministry and Admin. on some issues. Admin actively supported the school being rebuilt with a former principal having the new library named in his honour because of his efforts. A member of the senior staff had also been acting deputy on two separate occasions and had actively worked to have the school rebuilt.

The administration (in the past) claimed it was trying to do the best for every one. But as far as we could see it was just trying to screw us to get the most out of us. In the finish we said, "That's it, we're going to work to rule because every time we agree on anything we seem to come off second best."¹

ENTERING THE PROJECT

Belmont entered the National Project as a result of the following sequence of events: the State Steering Committee shortlisted Belmont for consideration as a project school; the Central Project Team consulted the union representative and the administration at Belmont and both parties agreed that the whole staff be asked whether they wanted the school to become involved; a short staff meeting was held at which the school accepted an invitation to join the project; a second and longer staff meeting was held at which representatives from the Union and Ministry provided further details on what the project involved.

Even though the staff voted to join the project at a meeting for which advance notice was given, they did so under circumstances that left some of them feeling uneasy. From their memory of the matter, the decision was made in about five minutes at the end of the day.² Apparently a decision had to be made that day.

So when the decision went to staff, the staff were not totally conversant or informed about what was involved. Some staff still have only a vague idea of what the National Project involves.

The school became involved in the National Project with very little consultation with the staff. It was a decision that had to be made very very quickly and it was a decision that was made by people before it got to the staff and then it was more like a token thing mentioned to the staff, like, "There's this project. We've got to decide whether we're in it." It became very rushed. And then we simply found we are involved. It ended up just like another scheme being introduced without staff really having any say about whether they wanted to be in it or not.

¹ *This to me overstates their perspective and down plays the positive role of the administration.*

² *This, as I recall, formed only part of the agenda at the Staff Assembly. There was no rush for THIS decision to be made. There was a rush decision made on the committee membership.*

What counts as "little consultation" can vary from one person to the next. Thus, another perspective on this matter was that:

A lot of consultation took place. This involved people such as Larry Hamilton, Kevin O'Keefe, Peter Hamilton and Ed Harken speaking to the general staff and the senior staff council.

I know that the decision was not made before staff were consulted about whether they wanted to be involved or not.

Some staff also had the uneasy feeling that they were being presented with a fait accompli, that they were being asked to rubber stamp a decision already taken by the administration and industrial leadership of the school.

The feeling we had was that a small number of staff had decided we were going to be involved and then it became a matter of trying to convince the rest of the staff, but in a very quick way, that we are involved.³

Abiding memories of the Managing Change in School project provided a third source of uneasiness. Staff had poured a lot of effort into this project and then it ran into barriers. That experience left them wondering about how much energy to invest in the National Project, what the return would be, and whether they would receive support further down the track.

There was fear at the beginning that the National Project would be like Managing Change in Schools and other Ministry initiatives. There was some apathy because of no additional resources.

Given these reservations, why did Belmont staff vote to join the project? Two major factors were largely responsible: the Teachers Union had backed the project; and top ranking Union and Ministry officers had agreed to set up a joint Steering Committee to guarantee industrial and bureaucratic support. Some staff received further reassurance from knowing that their union representative would be on the committee and in a position to keep an eye on the project.

Once we saw the Union and Ministry at top management level coming into the school and sitting down and saying, "We're partners in this project," that was very reassuring and an important step.

My role (as union rep) on the Committee was to see that nothing was done to erode the conditions that we've got. That's the way the Union see it as well, not just me. That's the way they put it

³ *The vocal Union group does this very well.*

to me: "We want you there to look after our interests." That's still the same.

To a lesser extent, the Belmont staff voted to join the project because it fitted their image of themselves and the school as being innovative:

The staff are aware that Belmont is a progressive school. Therefore the National Project is not out of place. Not that with the National Project we're doing anything really new and wonderful because we're often progressive, therefore it fits in. It's not the sudden light at the end of the tunnel sort of thing because Belmont is a progressive school and is doing good work anyway.

THE NATIONAL PROJECT COMMITTEE

Having decided to join the project in October, Belmont was asked in November by the Central Project Team, to choose a school project committee to attend a three day seminar. The request came at short notice. Nominations had to be called for and names submitted within 24 hours. Six nominations were received. Of these four were selected, not by the staff as a whole, but by the school administration and senior staff - an event which led one teacher to comment, "That was the way things were done anyway."

The seven person project committee consisted of the outgoing principal's nominee (the principal had been appointed to another school, starting in 1992), the incoming principal, the union representative at the school, and four other staff. In terms of sex, subject and status, the committee was unrepresentative. Only two of the seven members were male - the new principal and union representative. Some subject departments had no senior staff and consequently were disenfranchised during the selection process. And all of the six nominations submitted for selection came from the ranks of the junior staff. Two ex officio members, the new principal and the outgoing principal's nominee (an acting deputy principal at the time), represented the administration but the committee contained no representation from middle management. To some extent, the imbalance was corrected during first term by the appointment of a male senior staff member to the committee. And, though a school development coordinator 6 time, the project coordinator holds a substantive head of department position and thus may be regarded as also representing middle management. However, the fact remains that the males on the committee occupied 'required positions' (principal, union representative, and senior staff representative) while all the 'contested' positions were filled by females because only females nominated. The only female to fill a required position was the coordinator. As a result of these imbalances, according to one observer in the school,

The committee doesn't have the status it really deserves. The senior staff form an important communication link in the school. They understand school organisation, accept people's ideas and have the mechanism to implement them. Implementation is going to be more difficult certainly because of this and so is the process of gathering data.⁴

Throughout first term (1992), tension mounted within and outside the committee. The committee had been hastily selected by the school administration and senior staff rather than democratically elected by all the staff. This undermined its legitimacy and status. In 1991, the outgoing principal appointed his nominee to the position of committee coordinator, a position which entailed a trip to the Eastern states. The trip, and the process of appointing rather than electing the coordinator, created further resentment. To make matters worse, when the committee was inducted into the project and proceeded to develop proposals, it was urged by project leaders and advisers to favourably consider a form of work organisation for the school based on team work, collegial decision making and collective responsibility. The inconsistency between this ideology and the way in which the committee was seen to be set up dismayed some members and hampered the development of a harmonious and productive committee. For example:

It was a most difficult committee to work with because everything had to be negotiated - the times, the secretary, the agenda. All the time seemed to be spent on procedural things so we had no real time for the philosophical things.

There were a lot of conflicts in the group. The members didn't converse pleasantly with one another. There were confrontationist type discussions about everything. It was an uncomfortable committee. There was tension because of different views over the way things should be done, such as - should the coordinator's role be alternated. People were aggressive, they monopolised discussion, didn't listen, butted in, talked over the top of one another.

(Some members) came out of the National Project meetings earlier this year shaking their heads because of the dilemma of trying to get people on the committee working together.

Interestingly, the union representative, like the coordinator, was not voted onto the committee by the whole staff, but this appointment seemed to

⁴ *Maybe heads of department, with devolution, have already got too much to do.*

cause no controversy⁵ - nor did the fact that the union representative received some extra inservicing because of the industrial role involved.⁶ Furthermore, other committees in the school had been formed without a general election and without overt dissent. It may also be noted that the coordinator had been appointed as the principal's nominee months before the school became officially involved in the project. During that time, and before becoming the project coordinator, she liaised with the Ministry as a member of the school's administration. The position of coordinator evolved as a result of the principal being appointed to another school and not having time to commit himself to the project.

THE APRIL 10th BLOW UP

One of the criticisms the staff levelled at the committee was that it seemed to be doing nothing. So the committee decided to make a major presentation of its work to the staff assembly on the last day of first term (April 10). Far from allaying staff dissatisfaction, notice of the meeting intensified hostility towards the project. At the meeting this hostility erupted into a major blow up which occupied most of the session. The strength of feeling caught many by surprise. In the words of several committee members:

I wasn't aware of the depth of negativity.

I didn't realise how much heat there was.

I knew it was there - discontent - but I didn't think it was going to be so big. It took me the whole school holidays to get over it. It was quite traumatic.

At the meeting it became clear that the staff were dissatisfied not with the committee itself, but with the way it was formulated and with the decision making structure that had been established over a number of years. For example:

The staff weren't upset with the people on the committee. They were upset with the process they went through to get there. The coordinator was doing a good job but people saw she had been

⁵ The staff accepted the fact that I was the Union representative at the time and that a Union rep. was required on the committee. I was the person expected to take that role. Most people also knew that I had had meetings with Union people regarding the NPQTL.

⁶ I'm not sure what you mean here by "extra inservicing". I spent one day with the Union reps from the other schools at Union head office discussing the project with the Union district organisers

manoeuvred into this position. That's really what people were upset about.

What made us angry was that the committee weren't representing the staff. They were representing a small group of people who decided they wanted to get into the scheme.⁷

The whole thing just blew up. It was really fiery, really a backlash against things that had happened for five years before.

Staff didn't feel they were part of the project. A lot were still living in the past because the past meant for them a former administration making decisions they weren't involved in.

Voicing these feeling cleared the air. It also created a need to ask whether the school still wanted to remain in the project. In the event the staff did reconfirm its commitment, though as one participant observed, "No one said no but this doesn't mean there would not have been some abstentions." The meeting then decided to disband the committee and elect a new one, consisting of ten members. After lengthy discussion on appropriate voting procedures, a new committee was elected with all but one of the first committee members being returned to office. None of the three additional members are male or from the ranks of the senior staff.⁸

Despite the trauma for some, the staff from all quarters said the 'blow up' was very beneficial, for the project and the committee.⁹

Now the committee does have the support of the staff because the staff did elect it.

Since April we (the committee) have had the backing of the whole school, though some are still waiting to see what the National Project will do.

We re-affirmed our commitment to the project. The staff endorsed it.

The big upset raised the profile of the National Project committee. Other staff are now aware of the National Project. They feel more a part of the National Project. There is no sniping now.

⁷ This comment is interesting in light of the fact that only two junior female staff had also nominated to be on the committee. Even if they had been included, would staff still be levelling this criticism?

⁸ Or from the core of vocal critics.

⁹ It produced a better working group: more energy, more ideas.

April the 10th - we needed it.

Of the ten staff on the new committee, two are from Social Studies, two from English, two Art, one Manual Arts, one Ed. Support, one Home Economics/Admin, and one Admin. The April 10 meeting agreed that the project coordinator at the school be elected by the new committee, not the whole staff. The new committee has done that. It re-appointed the coordinator from the first committee. According to one member of the new committee, "Now we've learned, we've developed skills. Now we are able as a group to be more equal, calm, less confrontationist."

The 'blow up' exposed the need for a more acceptable form of consultation. That need has been responded to. Before the end of the semester, two drafts of a participative decision making policy had been produced and circulated to staff and a third was on the way. The general consensus among staff is that this policy is:

A better way of going about things.

A good thing

There's a fair bit of apathy but this document should help people see there are different types of decisions, that there are some decisions that only the admin can make.¹⁰

THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE

In the nine month period from October 1991 to June 1992, the committee:

- participated in three 3 day seminars (two before Christmas and one in March)
- conducted two 1 day retreats (in April and June)
- held fortnightly meetings, each one spread over a double teaching period
- addressed formal staff assemblies every month
- published regular project bulletins for the staff
- read relevant literature.

¹⁰ *It is probably 80% or more, the same as the structure that already existed. Some people are not tuned into school policy.*

The type of work done during these activities can be discussed under the headings of self education, conceptual framework, project proposals, and involving staff and others.

SELF EDUCATION

At the beginning, the committee members faced the task of gaining a clear understanding of the philosophy, objectives, dimensions, opportunities, and limits of the project. The three 3 day seminars provided them with much of the necessary information. At these seminars they met with representatives from the other six project schools in Western Australia, listened to guest speakers from the unions, industry and the Ministry, took part in interschool workshops, and discussed the implications of the NSP for their own school.

Apart from the seminars, the committee have been left pretty much to their own devices. There has been very little contact with the other six project schools and no real comparing of notes with them. For example:

The evaluation process meant to include three staff from one school visiting another school to spend three days there to ask questions, and to have a fresh set of eyes. But we baulked at that, perhaps because it was an evaluation and perhaps because our understanding of evaluation was different and because we haven't got anything to evaluate because we have no proposals underway - that has been our problem.

Similarly, the "Teachers Union has shown no interest and has not got involved at all." And the Central Project Team has kept largely out of the way - which led one member of the committee to comment:

I'm surprised at the lack of contact. I suppose they're waiting for us to ask them and perhaps they see us as a busy school and don't want to interfere I'm a bit perplexed. I thought they'd be like the old School Development Officer - come out, go for a walk around the school, how's it going, have you considered these alternatives, provide thought provoking questions and try to get us out of our rut.

According to another view considered the relative isolation of the committee from the Central Project Team was largely self imposed.

(The Central Project Team said) they'll come and talk us but we haven't used them much because we're trying to sort out our own thinking. We invite them to come along and they can listen to what we're saying but that's as far as it's got.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Early in the project, the committee decided to take the long term view that the first year be devoted to the generation of ideas, the second year to developing strategic plans for implementation, and years 3-5 to institutionalisation. One member explained that:

We've been trying to get our thinking right first; to get a sound basis for our proposals. The Managing Change in School project was a bit spotty in its approach. We want to avoid that and come from a strong, shared philosophical base.¹¹

To develop this strong, shared philosophical base, the committee worked within the framework of a six step process provided by the Central Project Team. The framework entails:

1. developing a vision of where the school community would like the school to be in five or six years time
2. constructing a profile of where the school is at present
3. examining the gap between vision and profile in order to help identify problem(s)
4. determining "how will we know when the problem is being resolved"
5. generating and implementing strategies to solve the problems
6. evaluating and judging outcomes.

Steps 1-4, and generating strategies (step 5), belong to the first year of the project. Implementing strategies (step 5) is scheduled for year two, while evaluating the outcomes probably belongs to years two and three. As the following account indicates, the committee has made some progress on steps 1-5 of the framework. The philosophical base is more than just the results of each step; it also includes the rationale underlying them. The main basis for the rationale seems to be the fundamental and genuine beliefs that the staff hold about student learning.

Vision

¹¹ This is potentially misleading because in the first four months of the year, "projects" or "ideas" were often referred to as National Project ideas, clearly well ahead of the conceptual stages.

So far the committee has formulated a vision statement and a project motto. It has also embraced a loose collection of general concepts that together, with the statement and the motto, constitute the ingredients of a philosophical base.

Vision statement: "Belmont is a place of creative learning, characterised by diversity and cooperative partnerships which promote growth and empower people."

Project motto: "SYNERGY: the power of people working together."

Other concepts:

- education for the 21st Century
- schools for a changing world
- active learning
- student centered learning
- concepts in the Finn, Mayer and Carmichael reports

There are different strands within this list. One strand consists of the humanistic philosophy underlying student centred learning; the emphasis here is upon changing the school to fit the student. The other strand consists of a behaviourist philosophy underpinned by the imperatives of economically driven educational reform; the emphasis here is upon changing the student to fit society. It is not clear how these strands are to be combined to form a unified conceptual framework, or whether staff who support one strand of philosophy are equally committed to the other strand.

Some parts of the philosophical base are documented in highly general terms. For example, education for the 21st Century means education for the changing world, which means changes in the spheres of work, family and community attitudes. It's been left almost as broadly as that. Other parts have been specified in more detail, as the following statement indicates.

Student centred learning is a structured system for creating a positive learning environment, in which students are encouraged to take increased and ever increasing responsibility for the planning, organizing, and evaluation of their own work. This leads to students taking a much more active part in all aspects of school life.

The heart of student centred learning is the enhancement of self esteem through self discipline, ownership of the curriculum, and experience of SYNERGY (the power of people working together) in the classroom.

In order to make this 'happen' system viable in the school, extensive re-training of teachers is required since most teachers themselves were taught and trained in a traditional manner.

Teachers need to develop group work skills, assertiveness, high self esteem, and the ability to transmit these assets to the students.

(Statement by Donna Brandis, Student Centred Learning consultant to the school)

The following comments from committee members provide a further indication of the origin, nature and acceptance of the philosophical base of the NSP at Belmont.

The staff are not tuned in to the Finn and Mayer reports. They have little access to those reports. The staff are aware of "Education for the 21st Century."

During workshops we were exposed thoroughly to systems work units and preparing students for the 21st Century as a central theme.

We had a lot of talks from industry, saying group processing is important and skills like cooperative partnerships are necessary. They stressed the need for relevance rather than compartmentalised knowledge - that is, knowledge being brought to bear to solve a particular problem - creativity, adaptability, problem solving, initiative. Industry wants these sets of characteristics which in the past have been optional but now they're imperative because of the different work organisation.

The staff as a whole have not really been exposed to Finn and Mayer and therefore may not know what they are letting themselves in for. The INSTEP (innovative skills training and education program) students go one day per week to the workforce and identify key competencies. The English and Maths teachers are trying to supervise this and although they haven't been told it's Finn and Mayer they are experiencing it.¹² So there is no strong ideological resistance to Finn and Mayer. Teachers are concerned about employment and the economy - though some teachers might make an aside about the balance. We haven't had much opportunity to talk about it as a staff. We've only got one copy of the Mayer Report and that's been sitting around for awhile.

¹² How are they "supervising"?

Profile

Having formulated its vision for the future, the committee constructed a profile of the school "by focussing on the current learning and working environment." The end result was a list of 25 weaknesses and 18 strengths.

Problems

The gap between the school's vision and its profile helped the committee identify the following problems concerned with work organisation.

Time: the rigid timetable structure limits the range of options available for students and prevents a more productive use of the school's resources; the problem here, then, is how to extend the use of time in the day, week, and year and make it more flexible.

Pedagogy: the traditional teacher-centered approaches to instruction, combined with the Unit Curriculum, do not encourage the students to learn how to learn or take greater responsibility for their own learning.

Staffing: current practice does not allow staff to be selected and deployed on the basis of the school's expectations.

Staff/student contact: insufficient and fragmented contact between staff and students makes a proper system of accountability impossible; the problem here, is how to create groups of teachers and students who feel responsible to one another for learning outcomes.

Communication and decision making: how to involve the whole staff in decisions; full staff meetings have proved less than effective because there is limited opportunity for individuals to participate and the silent majority becomes disempowered.

The committee, however, identified a problem more fundamental than the five work organisation problems. They labelled it, "student passivity", which means low levels of responsibility, ownership, motivation and aspiration among students with respect to their own learning. The work organisation problems were seen to contribute to student passivity, but the committee located the root cause of it in the lack of a learner focussed philosophy. In the final analysis the problem at Belmont, according to the committee, is not structural, but cultural. As one member commented:

At the last meeting of the committee we asked, "What is the problem?" We identified the key problem as - we have not got a learner focussed philosophy at the school, the students lack

commitment to learning, there is a lack of relevance and the students show a tendency to be disaffected with their learning.¹³

Interestingly, the committee chose not to conceptualise the problem in terms of student learning outcomes.

Problem Resolution Indicators

So far the committee appears not to have tackled the question, "How will we know when the problem is being resolved?" (See footnote 13)

Generating Strategies

The committee is aware that two principles should underlie the strategies generated to solve the problems identified by the committee: (a) the school, rather than the system or the teacher, is the key unit for change, and (b) within the school the key sub-unit for change is the systems work unit, rather than the teacher. Several comments from a document written by the principal clothe these principles in more detail.

The top down approach doesn't enable schools to respond to the rapidly changing demands. On the other hand the emphasis on the individual teacher can lead to valuable personal development. But unless the change is embedded in the institutional structure it can tend to be a series of 'fads' which are fragmented and generally not sustained.

However, the model which the entire project is guided by is the 'systems work unit', which is defined as, "A collaborative, outcomes focussed, responsible, self evaluating, creative and problem solving form of work organisation."

¹³ Since that meeting we met with Steve Simpson (ECU) to evaluate our progress and to establish, "What is the problem?" The resolution was that, "Students are not enthusiastic, not motivated for their own learning."

We then listed factors which indicate that it is a problem. This was followed by a list of statements in answer to the question, "When will we know if the problem has gone away?" The list included: fewer behavioural problems, improved attendance, improved scores, perceived interest in learning, and the perception that students are taking greater responsibility for their work.

Note: this is about the fourth time we have re-affirmed that "student disaffection with their learning" is the problem. It is also top priority in the School Development Plan this year, so it is an issue which was identified by staff last year. The NPQTL and SDP are in accord on this matter.

The committee seem prepared to accept these two principles, at least insofar as they are consistent with student centred learning and a learner focussed philosophy.

Max Angus and Laurie Carmichael are really saying a school really should be comprised of systems work units which are self initiating, self directing, and self monitoring - and thus release the energy of people who traditionally depend on the hierarchy to be told what to do - that is, they now can go ahead and do it when they see the need.¹⁴

Ultimately we want students to be involved in the organisation and evaluation of their work, that is to be self initiating and self monitoring.

The systems work unit terminology has bothered staff but the more we talk about it the more the staff like it.

We want to create collegial groups of teachers looking after small groups of children and becoming more responsible for them.

Despite these comments, as we shall see later in the Issues section, there remains some ambivalence at Belmont about what constitutes the key unit of change.

PROJECT PROPOSALS

In devising strategies to resolve problems, the committee focussed more on initiatives than proposals. To solve the problem of student passivity and the lack of a learner focussed philosophy, the committee opted for existing initiatives - Active Learning (a School Development Plan priority) and Student Centred Learning.¹⁵ On the one hand, it might be argued, these initiatives are based on the principle that the teacher and individual classroom are the key units of change. On the other hand, as one committee member pointed out,

It is recognised that Student Centred Learning requires a fundamental shift in people's thinking at all levels. To be effective, the organisation as a whole needs to reflect the philosophy and support teachers and students at the classroom level. Student Centred Learning is not merely a strategy but an organisational and cultural change.

¹⁴ *As a senior science teacher I operated within the "system framework" in this way !*

¹⁵ *Both of these arose from the School Development Planning process and should be clearly stated as such.*

To resolve the work organisation problems the committee set up five subcommittees (one for each of the problem areas), and prior to that developed an Alternative Year 8 initiative, a temporary teacher proposal, and a participative decision making initiative.

The committee used three methods to generate proposals. One involved placing a suggestion box in the staffroom and inviting staff to submit ideas. Some thirty proposals were collected through that avenue. None of them have been acted on yet because the committee wanted to develop a conceptual framework first and use it as a basis for determining the suitability and significance of each of the thirty proposals, rather than make decisions on proposals in isolation from each other and in isolation from some overarching rationale.

The second method used by the committee to generate proposals was to develop them during meetings of the committee. Only two proposals emerged from that source. One was formulated at a three day seminar before Christmas. It recommended retaining the services of temporary teachers at Belmont even to the exclusion of teachers who had been transferred to Belmont for 1992. As such it involved breaking the rules and fitted one aspect of the rationale underlying the NSP. The second proposal was developed during the fortnightly meetings of the committee. It involved establishing an Alternative Year 8 program based on the principles of the systems work unit. In addition to generating proposals, committee meetings were used for discussing matters related to them. For example:

At the one day retreats we blackboard problems; look at learning outcomes, test them out by approaching them from different directions, look at teachers submissions, and ask, "Have we got it right?"

A third method involved soliciting ideas and submissions at school development days.

INVOLVING STAFF AND OTHERS

During most of the first six months, the committee made considerable efforts to inform the staff about the project. This entailed placing regular written bulletins in staff mail boxes and presenting progress reports at staff assemblies and subject department meetings. Some committee members held reservations about the success of these processes.

I don't think everyone has been kept fully informed, partly because it's very hard to do.

Part of the problem has been the lack of involvement of senior staff. It hasn't been a natural movement. Now it (NSP) has to be forced into the agenda of our senior staff meetings. The senior staff are not antagonistic, just too busy.

Senior staff can't keep up with informing staff in subject department meetings of things like the systems work unit, active learning, student centred learning etc because they have enough of their own subject matter business to attend to. That is why the National Project will take a long time, because of the backlog of agenda items for senior staff and departments to get through.

The National Project is not discussed much at subject department meetings because senior teachers have crowded agendas to address in imparting critical knowledge that requires departmental input. There are more pressing issues requiring input - for example, participative decision making.

We've informed staff in the orthodox ways - through the suggestion box, brochures, staff meetings, etc. The big problem is how to make this different, innovative. So far we've done the traditional thing. We need to communicate more effectively. We documented fifteen strategies the other day on how we communicate. Telling people on a theoretical level is fairly dry. Once they've got the basic gist of it, that's all they want to know.

The committee gets things in place and then members have a reticence to be forward in presenting these ideas because of the nature of the group. They generally aren't in senior positions and therefore don't see themselves in a position to have a high profile.

When the committee present material at staff assemblies, they do it in a nice way, not a leadership way. Instead of saying, "This is where we're going, it's exciting, it's important, follow us," it's more like, "This is what we've done so far and we hope you like it."

Towards the end of second term, the committee decided to go beyond involving staff at the level of providing information. It set up five sub committees and invited staff to participate in them. But it is an horrendous two weeks - marking exam papers, end of term etc - so the sub committees have not made an impact.

The committee kept parents informed of project activities through reports at P and C meetings and school newsletters. Two parents attended the committee's second one day retreat.

So far the Student Council has been told about the NSP by the principal, and so have the students in the Alternative Year 8 program when it was set up. Overall, though, the students are not really aware of the National Project. The committee envisages that in the long term, they will become increasingly involved in the work of the project.

ISSUES

Numerous tensions, conceptual and otherwise, emerged at Belmont during the first nine months of the project. These tensions vary in intensity and type. Some resulted from conflicts within the school, while others involved conflicts between the school and elements from outside. Eleven of them are outlined below. They are grouped under three broad questions. What counts as being in the NSP? What is the key unit of change? What other issues have beset the project?

WHAT COUNTS AS THE NSP

1. Initiatives versus Proposals

Arguably the NSP hinges on schools developing proposals rather than initiatives. Proposals outline changes that 'break the rules', that require permission from the State Steering Committee to implement, and that are quarantined within the school submitting them. Initiatives are changes that can be introduced within the existing regulatory framework, that schools can implement without the permission of external authorities, and that are not quarantined. According to this line of reasoning, if schools fail to produce proposals then the project loses its 'raison d'être', the ground is cut from under its feet because a key assumption underlying the project is that schools know what changes are necessary to improve the quality of teaching and learning but are blocked from making them by externally imposed prohibitions.

Very early in the project, Belmont submitted one 'proposal' to the State Steering Committee. The school asked for permission to retain its temporary teachers in preference to having teachers transferred in from other schools. The 'proposal' was rejected because,

This was a contentious issue. The staff voted to go ahead and send a proposal to the State Steering Committee but this was rejected as it was a blanket request; it didn't present a valid case for the individual teachers concerned.

According to some committee members the proposal was rushed through and, according to a unionist not on the committee, it was non-negotiable at the time.

We value our temporary teachers and thought we should be able to hold them. But the proposal fell flat on its face because it raised expectations which weren't fulfilled.

A lot of staff felt unhappy. They realised there was division on the committee about it. We did it because we felt we had to get a proposal on the way. So we rushed it. People felt bulldozed. We sent it off to the Steering Committee and it was rejected. It looked bad because the two union reps on the committee weren't there¹⁶ (at the staff meeting when the proposal was presented for approval). It looked like the union wasn't agreeing with it. This experience made us realise the need to go slowly.

Unionists on the staff were irate that it could even be contemplated that people at the eleventh hour could be told suddenly, "This is a quarantine school for staff transfers." That was anathema to us. We'd already had phone calls from teachers on transfer to Belmont. For me and my colleagues who had put up with privation out in the country with no GEHA housing and who knew what it meant to be told you can go to Belmont and get back to your home in the city - and then to be suddenly told no - it was just unfair. The principle was wrong and the matter was non negotiable.

Since then, virtually all of the 'proposals' developed by the Belmont staff have really been 'initiatives' - they can be accommodated within the existing system. The committee is somewhat apologetic about this. It knows that the State and National architects of the project expect proposals. But, as different committee members commented:

We're finding it very hard to challenge the rules. We haven't come up with any major proposals which require assistance from the Ministry or the Union because our initiatives are radical enough in our own setting to cause a major change.

When people were told, "You can break the rules, you can do what you like," they said, "Oh well, I'd like to do something about this." But there was nothing stopping them before; most of the suggestions were things they could have done in the school anyway. People tend to be blinkered and they just carry on. They might say, "This is no good, it could be better" but they don't do anything about it.

¹⁶ At that time both were out of the school on other pre-arranged business.

On the other hand, the project stimulated the development of initiatives. It helped change the prevailing culture by making staff believe they had 'freedom' to advocate initiatives and that they would be supported by the system if they did so. It also provided staff with time release from teaching to undertake strategic planning. According to several staff:

The license to form proposals makes people start thinking about how to make school a better place to be in.

The NSP has freed people up in their thinking to consider more initiatives. It's been a very healthy process.

When we ask for proposals we get initiatives, but if we just asked for initiatives we wouldn't get any.

The Belmont experience raises several questions. If the project can succeed in stimulating desirable 'initiatives' in situations where they otherwise would not be forthcoming, then should its success be judged predominantly in terms of the development of 'proposals'? And if, when given the opportunity and incentive to 'break the rules', 70 staff can not produce 'proposals', does this suggest that they do not feel as constrained by the regulatory framework as the project rationale assumes?

2. Broad versus narrow view of the NSP

The NSP could be narrowed down further by arguing that not only must it be confined to 'proposals' (rather than initiatives) but that it must also be limited to proposals concerned with changes to the work organisation of schools. According to this view, there is a difference between the broad charter of the NQPTL and the more specific objectives of the NSP. The NQPTL takes under its umbrella all sorts of reforms that improve student outcomes whereas the particular brief of the NSP restricts the project to discovering more effective forms of work organisation. This distinction, of course, raises a thorny question: what exactly counts as a change in work organisation? For example, can changes to curriculum, or improvements in professional development programs, count as work organisation reforms, and if so under what conditions?

The project committee at Belmont have struggled with this issue and generally come out in favour of a broader view of the NSP. For example:

(Does the NSP apply only to changes to work organisation?)
We're having trouble sorting this out. The National Project includes pedagogy as well, teaching and learning. We've got a huge expanse of issues we could be addressing as part of the National Project. We're finding it hard to define where our limits are.

I see everything we do in the school as part of the National Project.

The National Project covers whatever strategies allow the learner focussed philosophy to be achieved.

The National Project will endorse a number of things that are already running - for example, Student Centred Learning which was formed last year before the National Project.

To some extent this broad view of the NSP is a consequence of identifying the problem to be addressed by the project as - "student passivity" and the lack of a "learner focussed philosophy." Defining the problem in that way allows for a range of programs to be included in the project that were mounted independently of the NSP - for example, Student Centred Learning, Active Learning, and School/Industry Links. It also raises the issue of how convinced the staff are about the rationale underlying the NSP.

There is a definite connection between the National Project and Student Centred Learning because one strategy to improve student outcomes is Student Centred Learning Active Learning is linked with Performance Indicator One in the School Development Plan and some staff think Student Centred Learning is the only way to Active Learning.

Student Centred Learning is helping initiate, develop and implement some of the principles being talked about at the national Project level. There is an overlap of objectives and principles.

They (project advocates at the national level) argue that low student outcomes come from poor work organisation. They aren't hammering a student learning focussed philosophy I don't share the view that removing the regulatory framework will solve the problems. A lot of work organisation we've got at the moment has survived for a long time and we move from it and we come back to it. Why do we slot back? (They) say it is because we've always done it and it's our comfort one. But the only way to break the comfort zone is to be philosophically certain that what we're doing is right and is going to be helping kids; that is, we need something more than removing the regulatory framework, we need something else to drive it.

If the NSP is defined too broadly, it could become a collection of unrelated school improvement initiatives, or used as a cover to usher in changes that otherwise would not get a past the gates. Not that either has happened at Belmont. In fact, a temporary safeguard was established early on when,

Some staff wanted a distinction made between what is National Project and what isn't because they took literally the statement that nothing was going to be implemented during the first year and they wanted to keep the committee honest to that.

3. National versus State versus School Project

The issue of "what is the National Project and what is not" involves another tension, namely, the competing imperatives of central direction and local autonomy. One way to indicate the nature of this tension is through a series of questions. For example, having agreed to participate in the project, what obligations does Belmont have to comply with the expectations of the National and State bodies sponsoring it? How far can a school go its own way before discounting itself as being in the project? To what extent should Belmont develop a sense of belonging to a project wider than the school itself?

The National and State bodies have provided Belmont with some resources, such as: time release for three 3 day seminars, two one day retreats, and fortnightly planning sessions; the services of two state project coordinators; an interstate trip for the school project coordinator; and two issues of Quality Time, one state project newsletter, and various other documents.

Accompanying these resources have been a number of expectations, such as: the school will develop proposals, not simply initiatives; the school will make recognisable progress by the time project evaluations are required; the school will focus on changes to work organisation rather than curriculum or staff development; the school will carry out its own evaluation and participate in evaluations conducted at state and national levels. In addition to these bureaucratic expectations, there are also industrial non-negotiables. For example:

The Ministry said, "Our bottom line is, no funds for it (the project)." The Union said, "Our bottom line is you don't interfere with class sizes and DOTT time."¹⁷

¹⁷ I would argue strongly with what is presented here. Many times, the committee requested clarification on this issue. The answers were always shrouded in terms of, whatever changes we wanted to make to work organisation in order to improve student outcomes we could develop and these would be presented to the State Steering Committee for the Ministry and the Union to work out ways of dealing with the issues, including if they concerned DOTT time and class sizes.

We were told to look at work organisation. How could we if we were going to be hamstrung from the word go about what areas of work organisation we could and could not touch? We also asked the Union this question and I am satisfied that we were not told to treat these areas as sacred. I believe that as Union members we are all concerned about our working conditions, but there are some members that perceive there may be a hidden agenda. Perhaps the Union is sending out mixed messages. Our

During the first nine months the school did not feel part of a 'national' project to any significant extent. Apart from having very little contact with anyone or anything 'national', the staff see education as a state responsibility, not a national enterprise. Also, the national reform agenda being led by the Finn, Mayer and Carmichael reports has made little impact so far, though the school is aware that the thrust of these reports is something they will eventually have to grapple with. Overall, the 'national' aspect of the project has provided Belmont with little kudos, status, or identity. To some extent this has been because Belmont has kept the project sponsors at arms' distance.

Being 'National' doesn't make people feel excited or important because most staff view education as a state responsibility. We've had a newsletter outlining what the other six schools are doing so the staff at Belmont are aware that we are part of a bigger enterprise.

The National Project seems quite removed from the national front. When we went to Jarrahdale recently. Denmark was there and that made me aware we are part of a wider enterprise. Most of the time the National Project for us is a school enterprise.

To some extent it's (the project) a fad. That's why we're not taking it on board hook, line and sinker. We're setting our own timelines and doing our own thinking on it. That probably upsets some people (at state and national level) who wanted far more radical change faster. They're looking at the political agenda all the time and the political agenda is always short term. They want the change because unless they can prove something's happening they won't get more funding from the Commonwealth for the following year. With an election coming up the Liberals might axe the project. The same with the Teachers Union. A change of leadership will knock the project on the head.

4. NSP versus SDP (School Development Plan)

Another way to identify "what is the National Project and what isn't" is to compare the work of the NSP committee with the School Development Plan (SDP). In 1988-9, the MCIS project (an earlier version of the NSP) laid the foundations for a School Development Plan. This plan was completed during 1990-91 and it consists of: a school purpose, five performance indicators, a management information system, a list of further directions, and an outline of resourcing for maintenance and priority areas. Oversight

goal is not to compromise teachers' working conditions at all but to improve learning outcomes for students through a better work organisation; the staff would not want to do this if it meant their working conditions were to deteriorate.

of the SDP is currently the responsibility of the School Decision Making Group (SDMG).

Much of the SDP overlaps with the committee's work on the philosophical base or conceptual framework for the NSP. For example, the SDP embraces Student Centred Learning, Active Learning and the School/Industry Link Program, all of which some staff claim to be part of the NSP.

The overlap between the SDP and the framework developed by the NSP committee invites a number of questions:

- Should the NSP work within the framework of the SDP or vice versa? That is, which framework takes precedence?
- Despite the overlap, do the NSP and SDP work independently of each other?
- Does the overlap create any confusion?
- Do the NSP proposals have to be ratified by the School Decision Making Group? What connection is there between the NSP committee and the SDMG?
- Should the NSP vision statement replace the SDP school purpose statement?

The two statements referred to in the last question are as follows:

VISION: "Belmont is a place of creative learning, characterised by diversity and cooperative partnerships which promote growth and empower people."

PURPOSE: "To develop the cognitive and social skills of students so that they may maximise employment opportunities, enjoy a full range of social and cultural activities, and participate as responsible members of society."

A number of staff made comments related to these questions. Some suggested that the NSP will overtake the SDP. This could occur if the NSP encompasses more than changes to work organisation, but not if the NSP focusses exclusively on changes to work organisation.

The National Project could become a conceptual framework encompassing everything else and enable staff to make the links between all the things going on.¹⁸

¹⁸ This appears to be the case at present.

The SDP has a purpose statement. The National Project vision statement is broader than the purpose statement. It expresses how we see the school five years from now.

At one stage I saw the National Project almost superceding school development planning, but now we've got it separate because school development planning is looking largely at the management information system for the five performance indicators and that's quite different from the National Project, though related to it. By the end of this year, when we rewrite our SDP, the two (NSP and SDP) will coincide. That's another way the National Project gets a guernsey. That is, instead of leading, the National Project is coming in behind and reinforcing and putting its own imprint on it.

It's difficult to make a distinction between that which is specifically National Project and general school development and SDP.

WHAT IS THE KEY UNIT OF CHANGE

5. School versus System

The Better Schools Report announced plans to decentralise the Western Australian education system by devolving power and responsibility from Central Office to local schools. It proposed making the school, rather than the system, the key unit of change:

Whereas once it was believed that a good system creates good schools, it is now recognised that good schools make a good system (1987:1).¹⁹

Instead of taking up the challenge, however, many schools carried on in the traditional mould. In an attempt to shake schools out of their conventional mind set, leaders of the new educational order established the MCIS project.

The NSP was introduced to carry on where MCIS left off - empowering schools to become the key unit of change. Some staff at Belmont see the NSP in those terms:

¹⁹ *Each helps each other! Why does a quote like this go unchallenged?*

The project provides an opportunity to apply the principles of devolution more fully. I found the sense of freedom really stimulating.

The National Project is not just for some schools. It's encouraging all schools to accept devolved responsibility and be more innovative. There are seven schools this year but next year other schools can volunteer to become involved. Belmont is not a pilot school for the rest of the system. We've been given an opportunity to start first but we won't be held up and other schools told, "Just follow Belmont."

However, other staff expressed concern that the NSP could be used by the Ministry as a way to introduce enterprise bargaining and downgrade teachers' hard won conditions of work. For them, from an industrial perspective, the system has to remain the key unit of decision making. A similar line was taken by staff who are sceptical of the NSP's capacity to spearhead a significant breakthrough in educational reform. In their view, the traditional top down approach still remains the most viable strategy.

If the Ministry wants to do this, it can't do it without spending money. The only way to get change is for the central body to initiate the change and radiate it out to schools, not vice versa. The MCIS project was a terrible waste.²⁰

In my view, something has to change but the National Project won't be it. It will be like other things that have come and gone. A lot of energies of people have gone into it for very little outcome at the end, particularly where the Ministry isn't spending any money. It's being done on the cheap. Some good ideas may come out of the National Project, but will they come to anything? If its only done in 5-7 schools and if all schools go in different directions, then eventually the Ministry will have to rein it in. The way the National Project is being run - with the quarantining etc - it won't have much effect, it won't be applied system wide, it will just fizzle out at the end. There has to be a crunch time when the Ministry calls off the quarantine and says, "You could break the rules then, but now you can't." The National Project may free up the schools while they are in the project but I don't see the Ministry relaxing.

The NSP, on the other hand, is based on the view that top down system level reforms have been tried and found wanting - over and over again. In

²⁰ MCIS was only a waste because the Union and Ministry were not prepared to accept the reality that devolution into schools means that structures/roles need to change within schools and staffing allocations need to be modified. Look at the quantity of devolution, increased retention rates, reduced staffing levels - and we still are expected to do it better !!

the final analysis, according to the philosophy of the NSP, educational improvements occur not through state level reforms but by stimulating schools to change and providing them with support: that is, reform comes one school at a time.²¹

6. School versus Teacher versus Systems Work Unit

Advocates of the system being the key unit of change often argue that the teacher makes more difference than the school. For them, 'good teachers make good schools' rather than 'good schools make good teachers'. And, they argue, the system can do more than the school to support teachers - industrially and professionally. Improvements in the quality of learning, they say, are best promoted by improvements in the working conditions of teachers and the professionalisation of teaching at the system level.

Some staff at Belmont have thought through this issue and have come down on the side of the teacher, rather than the school, as being the key unit of change. They see reform from the viewpoint of an individual teacher and classroom approach and are critical of attempts to produce improvements by restructuring the school.

In the finish I feel the first thing we have to do is survive in the schools; we can do all these other things later. If we're surviving pretty well in the school, well we can do those things but if we've got all these others things (like the NSP) coming in at you, then it's no use if you're not having a reasonable time in the classroom.

One teacher is in a (particular outside enterprise). He wants to come to school, do his job and go. I would say a good 50% are like that.

I don't feel constrained by 'rules'. I'm the old work type. I feel my job is in the classroom and anything outside of that impinges on what I'm supposed to be doing. What happens in the classroom is most important to me; other things are secondary to that. The National Project is secondary. I don't feel constrained. The National Project doesn't affect what I do in the classroom. Teachers are held up by a lack of resources and over sized classes. The structure is less important than the teachers themselves. What I find annoying is teachers breaking their necks to get out of the classroom. It disadvantages the kids. Most of the things in education should be done by teachers in the classrooms. What's hapening is that external things are having an effect which they shouldn't be. It's the quality of teachers

²¹ *However, Ministry and industrial chains exist.*

rather than the external forces. We need good teachers in the classrooms.

One of the problems with *Managing Change in Schools* was that it started to restructure. It brought out this thing with five managers - a model they put up.²² Everyone said, "You've got these people up there and all these people down here and we're copping the lot - like a funnel, it's all coming down to us. It should be the other way around, there should be less people up there." They said, "We're going to have five deputies doing the job that two used to do."²³

The belief that individual teachers and classrooms, supported by system wide structures, are the key units of change is implicit in the curriculum perspective on educational reform.

The fundamental issue in education is managing children in the class and literacy and numeracy skills. Belmont has a lot of kids who lack literary and numeracy skills. In the end if we don't have a better literacy program in the school and strengthen teachers' abilities to cope with the range of student behaviours, I don't think it matters what you do, you won't improve education.²⁴ I'm not sure yet whether the National Project will focus back on the very fundamental issues - but they must be addressed. Interestingly, this school has said no to a follow up to First Steps. It was proposed that we pick it up next year. We said no to that and I have some regrets about that because it might be better for our clientele than the National Project.

²² *The five managers were - financial registrar (non teacher), timetable coordinator, student services, staff services - was there a fifth? The concept also took some work away from heads of departments to enable them to do justice to their role.*

²³ *Whilst we were a member of the MCIS project a sub-committee was formed to explore ways in which we could better match the structure (work organisation) of the school with its changing function. The committee consisted of: guidance officer (1), heads of department (5), deputy principal (1), and teachers (4). A model was developed by analysing the needs of students and focusing on the desired outcomes. At all stages of deliberation, the committee had presented ideas to the heads of department for discussion. Two years of discussion and exploring had taken place. A proposal was put to the staff. At no time was there a curtailing of the decision making process. The model proposed installing four level one managers who would replace the then current structure of two deputy principals and a senior staff member working on the timetable almost full time. Work on this stalled: union officers were brought on site to address the staff at a staff assembly. We were not proposing to break any rules, only reorganise ourselves internally to suit our students' needs better.*

²⁴ *In 1991 the senior staff council rejected the concept of a "homework club" as a PSP submission. 1992 may see a different view.*

For some staff, the dividing line between teacher versus school was less clear cut:

Now when we talk about the quality of teaching - that's an important thing, that's why I like the title, the quality of teaching and learning, but from my very highly qualified teachers' viewpoint - for them to get room to breathe, to think, to create - there is no bloody time. I really wish we could ease the burden of marking on our teachers, give them the quality time to prepare exciting material, then learning would be improved 100%.

To effect change for education for the 21st Century we need to change the relationship between teachers and students. But when we probed (a leading advocate of the NSP) on this point in terms of pedagogy he said the project is not about pedagogy, it's about work organisation. His argument was that you can change pedagogy all you like and change teachers' professional development and have wonderful new programs going but they only last as long as teachers' interest in them. Whereas what he wants is change embedded in the organisation. I think they have to go hand in hand. I can't see that just a change in structure is going to have a significant influence on student learning outcomes unless you have an associated complementary change in the process. This is why I'm becoming more convinced that the only way to go is to adopt the philosophy of Student Centred Learning because if we do everything in terms of that then we will achieve both.

The tensions between these two perspectives on the key unit of change are reflected in the diversity of initiatives that comprise the NSP at Belmont. The teacher as the key unit is represented by the emphasis on Active Learning, Student Centred Learning, the learner focussed philosophy, and the temporary teacher proposal. The school as the key unit is represented in the project motto (SYNERGY - the power of people working together) and the Alternative Year 8 program based partly on a systems work unit model.²⁵

Arguably, the systems work unit forms the basis for a third perspective. In a small school, the systems work unit may be the school itself. In a large school like Belmont, multiple systems work units might be envisaged, in which case the systems work unit rather than the school could become regarded as the key unit for improving the quality of teaching and learning. Some staff at Belmont have already considered that possibility. For example:

²⁵ *And this has created some problems.*

In Manual Arts we work as a unit and we organise it fine. We do things to suit ourselves and use the blokes who can do the job best. It's when you get into the bigger group in the school that you have problems.²⁶

To function effectively as the key unit of change, systems work units, as sub groups within the school, would need considerable autonomy.²⁷ Ultimately, they may need their own funds and cost centre and the freedom to decide whether to spend their funds on, say, eight teaching staff, or six teaching staff and a laptop computer for each student in the unit, or six teaching staff and four teaching aides.²⁸

7. Whole school versus Optional Staff Participation

Part of the rationale underlying the NSP is that proposals for change should be connected to the overall operation of the school. Ideally, this means that the NSP must be a whole school venture - a matter of all in, or no project. In practice, it didn't work out that way at Belmont. A fair amount of staff indifference and opposition towards the project existed at the time when the school was invited to join up. To insist on total agreement would have seen the project rejected. Consequently, the decision to become a project school was made on the tacit understanding among staff as a whole that "those who didn't want to get involved didn't have to." It then became the ongoing task of the committee to win over the disbelievers and secure total staff commitment after the event. This was not a straightforward matter because,

Opposition to joining the project was not openly expressed. Concerns were not expressed openly until six months after we had been on the project. This is probably due to the culture being developed with the new principal; some staff had difficulty working on industrial issues with the former principal.

As previously intimated, total staff endorsement of the project has yet to be reached due to a range of factors - ideological opposition, vested interests, and the limited capacity of the project committee, by virtue of its

²⁶ *These units focus on subjects. The subject faculties have been the hub of our schools. Can units focus on an individual student? This is the issue.*

²⁷ *Maintaining staff knowledge and skills within a unit may be difficult.*

²⁸ *In 1993 we plan to establish some 'systems work units'. In Year 8 it is proposed to have two groups: (a) one of two teachers each teaching two subjects (for example, English and Social Studies) to two classes; (b) four teachers teaching their own specialist subject to four common classes. These people will make up systems work units with the opportunity to develop close relationships and have responsibility for the total development of the students in their care. It could include - pastoral care, parent liaison, discipline, counselling.*

composition, to exercise a leadership role. Some of the committee consider this situation either undesirable or in the long run untenable.

There was some opposition to joining the project but we accepted the invitation on the proviso that those interested could run with it and those not interested didn't have to be involved. But a whole school commitment really is necessary. When it comes to particular changes in work organisation, negotiation has to be at whole staff level.

The problem will be that staff either go with the NP or there will be no place for you at the school. That is what the core opposition group are afraid of. Up till now they can opt out, as with Student Centred Learning, but not further down the track.

WHAT OTHER ISSUES HAVE BESET THE PROJECT

8. Reflection versus Action

From the outset, many staff wanted the project to be carefully planned and soundly based. They warned against a quick fix, knee jerk approach and certainly did not want to be bulldozed into change that smacked of manipulation. In response to these concerns the committee decided to spend the first year establishing a strong, shared philosophical base and postpone the implementation phase until the second year. The staff as a whole endorsed that timeline when presented with it at the beginning of the 1992.

However, before first term had run its course, the committee was confronted with a widespread demand for results. Staff complained that the committee did not seem to be doing anything, that there was too much reflection and not enough action, and that it was about time proposals were implemented. As the following comments indicate, this conflict of views existed not only between different members of staff but also within individual staff - on and off the committee.

I feel continual frustration that things are so slow, but I realise things must be ironed out and that we can't afford blunders.

Some people on the staff still think, "What have you been doing all this time." I sit and think, "We've had a lot of meetings, we've talked all this stuff, but what are we doing?" I'd be there (at a project seminar in Fremantle) for three days and when we came back I'd think, "What the hell did we do there?" It seemed all relevant while I was there. When you get back there's

20-30 kids waiting to be dealt with and all that (three days at Fremantle) falls into insignificance.

Now we've come full circle; people are asking, "Why aren't you implementing it?" They forget the first day back this year when they endorsed the go slow approach.

Staff understand that the first year is for theoretical preparation, but there is still frustration. (Why?) Because how much time is warranted on a theoretical framework, particularly given the money involved - for example, 10 teachers out means \$1000's.

We have the teachers' proposals but we haven't released a public list. Therefore the staff are critical because they are not getting decent feedback and their proposals haven't been marshalled properly so there's been a decrease in submissions. The staff think their proposals have fallen into a deep dark hole. But only action will convince them. They will believe it when they see it.

Three committee members explained the reasons for the "go slow" approach in these terms:

The staff want to see results because they put in their submissions and think nothing's happening. We say, we are getting the big picture together so we can allocate resources carefully and can make decisions on the basis of good information having considered all factors.

As a committee we have got to be careful we don't get locked in with a few proposals, but remember to keep the big picture. We have an opportunity to break the mould and have a completely different school in the Year 2000 and that's a major approach. It's going to take time. We have to avoid getting sidetracked by little issues. The committee is still working on becoming aware of that let alone the rest of the school.

It's one thing for the committee to come up with vision, it's another to share it with the staff and develop a strategic plan to implement it. We're finding it's already too late to implement a number of our areas of thought in next year's timetable because the timetable has to be finalised by the end of this term - so we're only making minor work organisation changes for 1993. So ideas will be developed this year, the strategic plan developed in 1993, and implementation in 1994. It's a longer process than we thought.

There is no real resistance to the ingredients. Most agree with the philosophical base. But unless we look at the whole picture it's going to disadvantage some and advantage others and that would produce resistance. The only way to avoid that is to have

the big picture established and have such a significant change that ideally everyone benefits - that is, not bit by bit, not reform on the run.

I'm trying to deliberately hold back until the big picture is in place because once we make decisions on these and they're on the way they eat into resources and commit us to long term programs that might be in conflict with other things we might want to do anyway. With limited resources we need to be very sure where we focus these.

For example, we were offered a program - Stepping Out -to improve literacy. I'd like to do it. It's a wonderful idea and consistent with language across the curriculum. But it would involve 30 teachers for 30 hours. That's a week's work for half the staff - 350 days plus attending 5-6 sessions (3 hours) outside of school time. If we did that, and that would be top priority for the year, and it's not in the National Project it would burn people out.

That is, if we rush we find ourselves going down a path which we like at the time but in perspective we might prefer to take a different course.

The only things running currently at the moment are the Student Centred Learning, participative decision making, and staff development²⁹ - for AST's etc. We attend to things we have to do but we're holding back from new initiatives.

(When will you know you have got your thinking straight?) We're now using a data-based approach to decision making so when we come up with a proposal and when we get full agreement from the staff and have addressed all their concerns and know we've got the resources available -measured out the time and money - then we'll proceed.

Our grand plan is not a series of ongoing spotty processes. I don't know when we'll be certain, but the grand plan is shaping up and within the grand plan we are making tentative moves to go forward just by discussion. I have a hunch that once we have all the committees established, then it'll become clear what our priorities are going to be.

Despite this rationale for the "go slow" the committee felt under pressure to make concessions to satisfy the demand for results. In fact compromise appeared to apply on both sides. For example, one member of the "do something" lobby said:

²⁹ Also the SDP and PSP.

There are small initiatives they can take now that would appease us. To be solely devoted to the theoretical framework for a whole year is frustrating.³⁰

9. NSP versus Other Projects

At Belmont, the NSP is just one of a range of projects competing for a place on staff agendas. To change the metaphor and be more specific, if a league ladder were to be drawn up at Belmont at the end of second term, the NSP may not have featured in the semi-finals. At the end of first term, if sessional activities were permitted entry, then the NSP might have been relegated to the second division. According to some staff, the league ladder about half way through second term would be something like as follows:

1. Student Centred Learning and Active Learning
2. Participative Decision Making
3. Monitoring Standards (Belmont's version)
4. Goal Setting
5. School/Industry Links
6. School ball, school production (musical)

³⁰ *The National Project has provided a stimulus for change. The opportunity to examine our work practices in every aspect is exciting and empowering. Therefore I feel that despite the apparent slow progress in terms of generating proposals, the culture is changing and it will enable all staff to think creatively about their work organisation.*

Increasingly we hear comments like, "Well we could do that under the National Project." For example, the end of year closure is being discussed and two proposals involve breaking the rules by early dismissal.

Also the Alternative Upper School staff are currently reviewing their organisation. A very free discussion has resulted in some significant suggestions for change in 1993, such as:

(a) the introduction of a Year 12 course involving a one day per week work experience component and one day per week in a school enterprise;

(b) competency based assessment and the introduction of student portfolios;

(c) an extended Year 11 CSE program - for example, take six subjects over two years, blocks of work experience and extend time on English and Maths;

(d) a three year program for Years 11/12 CSE - that is, six subjects each year with the remaining twelve periods of time spent in industry focussing on objectives which are assessable as part of their CSE vocational subjects; for example, Early Childhood Studies could be studied for six periods at school and twelve periods in child care centres; this would enable more students to achieve success because it is in a practical context.

The National Project has given impetus to the 'devolution' process and people are believing that they can really make changes and can make a difference.

7. Exam results, reports
8. P.D. programs, counselling courses, inservice courses
9. NSP

The following comments help explain to the relatively low position of the NSP on the league ladder as perceived by some staff:

Something that is happening takes precedence over the National Project because it is only in the background. If the conceptual framework is on back burner, it will need a kick start to rekindle enthusiasm. At the moment, for many people, the National Project is the last thing on their mind. They only think of it when it comes up at a staff meeting or if they've put in a proposal.

Belmont is not relying on the National Project to raise its ethos and profile. The National Project could fold up and the ethos of the school would remain intact. The National Project is seen as just a matter of some people doing some work over there. It's as simple as that.

The National Project as a distinct entity isn't getting a high profile because people's professional timetables are blocked out.

However, while the NSP may not score highly it has assisted some of the other programs gain prominence and in so doing advanced its claim to come off the reserve bench.

The National Project has been able to interact with some of these (programs) and give them a higher profile. For example, School/Industry Links - I doubt whether I'd have agreed to allocate two days of PD time for teachers to go to industry if it were not for the National Project. Likewise with Student Centred Learning; I've given it a high profile - I attend all workshops and I helped to organise the weekend seminar at Jarrahdale and got sponsorship in.

When the National Project slots into one of these busy activities and helps further the aims of the activity, then it gets a higher profile. But on work organisation alone, independent of all these things, it's just not happening.

Other staff suggested that while the NSP might seem to be languishing in the wings waiting for a turn on centre stage, that situation is more the outcome of a crowded program than the new entrant lacking credentials.

The National Project would be given sufficient priority in the overall scheme of things to get enough airing for people to hear. But we're still at the late forming stage. They've done the storming stage. Probably from now on we're looking at the idea of having a better method of presenting issues.

Most people can see its (NSP) importance. The energies of staff get spread thinly. Now we are more careful about taking new things on board. We're taking on more with less resources. The National Project has a high enough profile to ride this out.

10. Working Smarter versus Working Harder

A tension exists between the NSP view that educational gains can be made by working smarter rather than harder, and the traditional view that meaningful reform is not possible without additional resources. Most of the committee agreed to accept the 'working smarter rather than harder' principle as part of the project's philosophical base. They consider it legitimate to expect that improved student outcomes can be produced by reorganising teachers' work in ways that do not require extra funds. However, the committee found it difficult to accept that setting up the project, generating proposals, and overseeing their implementation can be done within existing resources. They pointed out that in fact the NSP has used up more of the school's resources than meets the eye.

Materially, the NSP has imposed a cost upon the school through the use of photocopiers, fax machines, telephones, computers, and stationary.

At a human resource level, the activities of the committee have required someone to:

- organise relief teachers for the seminars, retreats and fortnightly meetings of the committee
- cover for the principal and project coordinator while they undertake project work
- record proceedings and type up minutes
- convene and chair the five sub committees
- provide, collect and send information required by the National and State bodies sponsoring the project

On a broader scale, the NSP has placed demands on the human resources of the school by taking up staff time:

- at staff assemblies and school development days
- in the five sub committees
- in the evaluation of the project (for example, attending interviews and responding to draft reports).

So far the staff have met these demands by working harder - by going beyond the call of duty, by drawing upon reserves of goodwill and a sense of professionalism. Meeting the demands by working smarter would mean acting upon suggestions such as: replacing one deputy with three clerical staff; combining the five SDP sub committees with the five NSP sub committees; reducing the size of the National Project committee; and using teacher relief money to conduct meetings after schools hours. So far none of this has happened. But the ideas are there. On the other hand, there is considerable resistance to the expectation that staff should work smarter. And there is some regret about the professional cost that the NSP imposes upon the staff.

"Work smarter not harder" I find hard to believe. People are working smarter, but they're also working a damn sight harder.

It's nice to be a member of the National Project team but that person has to prepare lessons prior to a day, half day or even two period session and colleagues very often are sharing that burden - that's one of the cost factors.

I'm concerned about being away from my classes by going to the National Project meetings because it's contradictory to say we are concerned in the National Project with student outcomes and then leave our classes. It doesn't sit well with me that I lose contact with my classes.

We've put a proposal into the Steering Committee for time release. We need ten people on the committee because of the subcommittees and because we're a large school. The sub committees get no time release and therefore will probably meet at lunch times.

It's a lot of money - eight people out of the school for three day seminars.

No one said to me they resented going off for three day seminars, but apparently that was said around the place: "There's ten people out of the school again." Fifteen relief teachers causes a lot of problems with the kids we've got. It's disruptive for them. People see that as a problem.³¹

³¹ This comes on top of normal changes due to excursions, inservice and staff sickness.

I prefer to do it in school hours because I've got other things I'd prefer to do outside of school hours. But I lose the same class on Monday and Friday and I start thinking, I don't want to be involved because it's causing me too many problems

English teachers do a lot of marking at home, so even if they got paid for having after school meeting, they've still got that work to do. Also, some teachers are doing university courses and have to go at 4 o'clock for university classes. There's marking, family commitments, other interests, night school. That's why the project can't be done quickly.

Look at the time (the coordinator) spent planning meetings and the time (the principal) spent. It's probably a day a week and there's no time relief for them.

One of the things that's been suggested is that our set of committees for SDP may become part of the National Project committee. That is, the SDP committee will amalgamate with the National Project committee. So we have one group, not two groups, and therefore lower workloads. The SDP has five sub committees. Each performance indicator has a sub committee of about eight people who meet an hour a week. That equals one day a week per committee or five days a week committed to school development planning. That represents one person for a whole year totally devoted to school development planning. Therefore in some respects I would prefer to have half a teacher and two extra clerical staff in the school to offload the work to allow the principal and deputies to do some of the tasks better.

Some teachers are on two or three committees. Some of the administration are one three or four committees. So it can get to a ridiculous stage.

The Registrar is conscious that every time we have a program in the school it costs - typing time, photocopying etc., all these costs which are not up front - meetings, agendas, minutes, photocopying etc. When the National Project committee has a day retreat we need eight relief teachers. That takes up to three hours of work time for me by the time I plan it, book people, fill out the forms, pay people, maintain records of who's been in and out of the school etc. And the clerical team pick up extra work, all of which we are not resourced to cover.

I'm not interested in pay for meetings after school. I like to go home and do my things at home. I'm not interested in getting extra money.

Our proposal is to reduce teachers workloads by .1, that is three periods off during the week and therefore we could have weekend or evening meetings. This will be a test of the extent of the resourcing. The Union (state level) said it deliberately did not want extra resources because it wanted the project to be an example of how schools can effect change without additional resources. On the one hand they've asked us to introduce radical ideas for changes in work organisation which have an effect at the national level which really implies massive resources. On the other hand, they're asking us to be a model for the way normal schools could operate and effect change without resources. So they're trying to have it both ways, but it's not possible.

11. Managing Change in Schools Project versus the NSP

As a strategy for change, the NSP is based on assumptions and conditions similar to those that applied to the MCIS project: for example - challenge the rules, consider changes only within existing resources, regard the school as the key unit of change, and quarantine proposals within the schools that develop them. However, the staff at Belmont pointed to significant differences in the overall structure of the two projects and the way they operated within the school. In themselves, these differences do not constitute an issue but they do add to the background against which to make sense of the NSP at Belmont.³²

(a) The NSP has a State Steering Committee, consisting of high ranking Union and Ministry officers, to decide whether proposals can proceed and "to see how they can be implemented to make them work." With MCIS "we had to negotiate with the Ministry; there was less flexibility and less Union support."

(b) MCIS was a Ministry initiative. In the case of the NSP the "Union motivated the whole thing in the first place and got it going. The Union has a vested interest in it - to get better conditions out of it, to sort out a better award. At present we've got an agreement that the Minister can change." Unlike MCIS, the NSP is sanctioned by a Memorandum of Agreement between the Union and the Ministry

³² Funding - MCIS paid for meetings out of school time. MCIS greatly assisted in developing the school development plan - especially the resourcing aspect and the influence of 'catalyst' people from inside and outside the school. MCIS paralleled devolution changes - many devolved tasks are now 'in the school'.

(e) MCIS took place when there were, "less things happening in the school at the time. Now we've so many things happening it's a matter of - have we got room for the National Project, can we afford the National Project?. Therefore the National Project has a lower profile."

EMERGING POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

This report has reviewed the NSP at Belmont from the time it began in October 1991 to the end of June 1992. During that nine month period the project combatted the recurring themes of dissent, frustration and struggle. Much of its work involved preparing the ground and clearing the air - for seemingly little result. However, when the school resumed after its mid year break, there were signs that all the work invested in the project was beginning to bear fruit. The following list documents a range of emerging positive developments for which the project can claim varying degrees of credit.

1. A 'core group' of teachers continue to meet and describe some innovative approaches to their teaching based on the philosophy of Student Centred Learning. They have decided to create a register of Student Centred Learning teachers and provide opportunities to visit one another's class in order to observe, coach and share ideas.
2. The Participative Decision Making policy has been generally well accepted. A process is now in place that enables all staff to be involved in a decision within a three day/stage process. This process empowers the silent positive majority, allows issues to be raised, and offers a structure conducive to the type of critical analysis that improves the quality of decisions. The policy has been extended to students, all of whom will be consulted on the school motto and the development of school goals.
3. The School/Industry Links initiatives have resulted in a greater awareness and co-operation with industry and the community:
 - many teachers now have a great affinity with the workplace and have established valuable contacts with industry following the two day teacher/industry exchange
 - industry has sponsored a seminar on Total Quality Management, a process which is being used more extensively in the school operation

- many teachers now have a great affinity with the workplace and have established valuable contacts with industry following the two day teacher/industry exchange
 - industry has sponsored a seminar on Total Quality Management, a process which is being used more extensively in the school operation
 - senior staff have attended a workshop on Total Quality Management³³
 - the three members of the Alternative Upper School team will be attending a six week Total Quality Management course next week (August 17).
4. The school is conducting a review of its post compulsory program, focussing on the 70% of students who do not aspire to tertiary education.
 5. The timetable for 1993 at Year 8 level is being considered with a view to accommodating teams of teachers operating within systems work units.
 6. The school has accepted an invitation to consider becoming a "Carmichael School" - to consider incorporating the features of the Carmichael report.
 7. Competency Based Assessment is now an increasing focus within the school. A computer program has been installed to facilitate this innovation, and the Alternative Upper School and an Alternative Lower School class will experiment with its implementation. It is currently being used in the INSTEP program with reasonable success.

The project is not a flourishing enterprise yet. Some intellectual arguments still have to be won, industrial issues negotiated, and professional interests accommodated. The emerging positive developments listed above, however, suggest that at Belmont the seeds of the NSP have not fallen on stony ground.³⁴

³³ Only some.

³⁴ These elements (1-7) are of course all part of the context of the whole school. It is difficult to designate areas which are specifically NSP and those emerging from other sources. However, the NSP has impacted on each through freeing them up and providing further stimulus. For example, teacher work placements proceeded partly because of the opportunity to experience other work organisations and to provide a 'mirror' on our own work organisation.

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