

# **The National Schools Network of Australia: A case study of organisational transformation in the Australian education system**

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## **1. Universal Education: The Bureaucracy and the Market**

Universal education, systems of education and educational organisations are cultural artefacts that Australia has inherited from Western Europe. A cursory glance at the prehistory of education and its eventual explosion and institutionalisation in the nineteenth century is essential in appreciating the contemporary issues that confront Australian education in the twenty-first century.

Mass education is chiefly a product of the West, more specifically of European origin. Before the Industrial Revolution in England which marked a decisive change in society's outlook towards education most people in pre-industrial England lived in oral culture. (Crittenden, 1988:39). Education was thus carried out by the spoken word and by the living example that the adults -- heads of households, community and church leaders -- manifested towards the younger generation. The family, being the natural and basic unit in society thus became the first classroom and the first school of children in the pre-industrial revolution era in Europe.

The explosion of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century dramatically altered the system of education implemented in England and in Europe. These radical changes eventually found their way to the other neighbouring countries in the Western hemisphere. The industrial societies of the flourishing nineteenth century then introduced compulsory school attendance laws. These ushered in the development of state education systems in these industrialising nations.

The latter half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century saw a tremendous expansion of the role of the State in the provision of education to societies' children. The State education role that began in Europe spread throughout the modern world reaching North America, Australia, Asia and Africa.

The study posits that the bureaucratic and market models have permeated Australian education. Michael Pusey says that:

each of Australia's six state education systems is governed formally and directly by its minister and his Director-General of Education, the permanent head of its bureaucracy. These state education departments differ only in size. They are all classical examples of integrated hierarchical bureaucratic structures which have remained virtually unchanged at least since the turn of the century... (Pusey, 1980:47)

The dominant organisational structure in Australian education during this era was the classical bureaucratic structure, represented by the States and the non-government denominational schools, particularly the Catholic Education System.

A fervour to whip up Australia to achieve competitiveness in the economic sphere and a growing international penchant for corporate management and small governance saw the evolution of the educational hierarchy into a bureaucracy driven mainly by market forces --

this is what the study describes as a benign market bureaucratic strategy. With this recent shift in governance style, the Commonwealth abandoned its previous circuitous and peripheral bureaucratic approach.

Marginson outlines this shift to market forces when he says that the “subordination of education to economic values means that what is good for the economy becomes what is good for education, and that education is only beneficial to the extent that it is beneficial in economic terms.” (Marginson, 1993: 65)

Both the Bureaucracy and the Markets acted as pendulum points that determined the shape and configuration of organisations in Australian education. However, the study asserts that there is a third approach that has also unmistakably exerted its own sway in the determination of organisational patterns. This is what the study describes very generally as a network.

Thompson says that “a network is often thought of as a ‘flat’ organisational form in contrast to the vertically organised hierarchical forms. It conjures up the idea of informal relationships between essentially equal social agents and agencies. The collegiate organisation is the classic example of a network. These kinds of organisational units are often cooperatively run.” (Thompson et. al, 1991: 13) When the idea of a network is introduced, an image of a vast, convoluted and labyrinthine web emerges.

## **2. The National Schools Network**

The National Schools Network (NSN) is an example of this organisational form.

Preston describes the NSN thus:

The National Schools Network in large part, as a model structure for national professional development. It is a cooperative project between the profession (represented through the teacher unions) and school authorities, with Commonwealth support. It involves action research at the school level that is thoroughly integrated with the work of individual teachers and the schools, with the objective of enhancing teachers’ professional practice to improve student learning. It takes an integrated whole school approach to change. Academics are involved as critical friends and resource people. The schools are strongly linked through the local cluster to State and national levels, with two-way channels of communication. (Preston, 1997: 87)

This study looks at the NSN as an organisational innovation in two ways. On the one hand, it is a national organisation, trying to situate itself in a state-level policy domain. (Teacher Quality in education). The other is that it is an organisation built around the professional community, rather than one based on bureaucratic authority or dictated by prevailing market forces.

The NSN evolved from the original National Schools Project (NSP) of the National Project on Quality Teaching and Learning. The origins of the National Schools Project lie in the context of industry and award re-structuring in Australia. (NPQTL, 1993: 1) The originally conceived approach of the NSP (which still remains the same for the NSN) was a perspective where:

Schools were no longer portrayed by governments, business, industry and the media as the cause of economic problems, but began to be treated as contributors to solutions. At the same time, the ideas behind economic reform and award re-structuring challenged schools to re-think what knowledge, attitudes and competencies the citizens and workers of the future would need. (NPQTL, 1993: 4)

After the completion of the NSP, a major consensus emerged from the three-year educational reform initiative. Participants to the NSP, namely government, teachers’ unions, parents groups and universities saw the need to continue and even accelerate the impressive gains

that were accomplished via the NSP. Thus, as an offshoot of the NSP, the National Schools Network was created.

The NSN essentially continues the pioneering work started by the NSP. The NSN has crystallised to become a major school-based reform effort with a national Australia-wide scope. The outstanding feature that NSN carries over from the NSP is its collaborative approach to reform.

The NSN was one of the three major components of the National Project on Quality Teaching and Learning (NPQTL) that was framed by teachers unions, school employing authorities, the Commonwealth and the Australian Council of Trade Unions in early 1993. The NSN was one of the most unique attempts at education reform. It was designed as a collaborative venture formed with more than 300 Australian schools (government and non-government, primary and secondary schools) nationwide and with support and participation coming from the Commonwealth, the various States, and the larger community (parents' associations, universities and teachers' unions).

The three main objectives of the NSN are the following:

1. The key objective of the NSN is improved learning outcomes through schools re-examining the traditional organisation and practices of teachers (Ladwig & White, 1996).
2. The NSN was mandated to spearhead reform efforts and to accomplish these within a school-based setting;
3. The NSN was also mandated to carry out these reforms through a cooperative approach: the Commonwealth, States, teachers' unions, and parents' groups were supposed to work together in achieving reform.

When the new Howard government came into power in 1996, financial support for the NSN, which mainly came from the Commonwealth, ended. The Commonwealth is still given slots in the NSN National Coordinating Body; however, the Commonwealth has yet to send an official representative to the official meetings.

Despite the withdrawal of financial support from the Commonwealth, most of the 300 Australian member schools, various university bodies and individual members (mostly academics) of the NSN decided to continue the existence of the NSN. This was accomplished primarily by asking member schools to pay regular fees to the network. Moreover, the NSN Coordinating Body provide training programs and 'broker' funding assistance from the States' education development funds to different member schools of the NSN. The training programs and the 'brokering' functions also provide some financial leverage to the fledgling NSN.

The NSN still retains its core function, that of being a collaborative network designed to promulgate reform in schools primarily through interventions in improving teacher conditions. However in addition to this, the NSN also sees itself as a lobby group that actively participates in political processes in order to influence the formulation and implementation of education policy in Australia.

The NSN actively seeks members from different schools in Australia. Regular publications and research undertakings -- funded by the Australian Research Commission (ARC) by the Department of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) and other organisations -- are also part of the 'services' that the NSN provide. The NSN has also established formal linkages with education reform bodies in the US and Germany.

## **A Meta-Analysis of the Impact of the NSN**

The paper analyses three of the most significant evaluation reports that have been made in relation with the NSN and the NSP. These three are (1) the External Review of the NSP; (2) the Synthesis of the Reported Practices of the NSP; and (3) Evaluating the Quality Schooling Program: Final Report.

1. The External Review of the National Schools Project that started in July 1992 and was completed in September 1993 was commissioned by the Work Organisation and Related Pedagogical Issues Working Party (WOWP) of the National Project on Quality Teaching and Learning (NPQTL). Since, the NSP had only been operational for a few months, the External Review was expected therefore to look at whether the pilot schools in the NSP program were inducing organisational changes with the end of accomplishing improve student learning. (NPQTL, 1993:1)

As a starting point, the Panel had to operate with a working rationale of the NPQTL and the its subsequent main output which was the NSP:

The NPQTL was specifically devised to provide the necessary forum in which the major partners responsible for schooling could meet in a spirit of co-operation and mutuality that was so clearly lacking in the institutional framework for schooling nationally. The NSP came into being as a direct result of widespread frustration with the prevailing regulatory and industrial framework for schooling. (NPQTL, 1993: 13)

The NSP was an attempt to put together various stakeholders in Australian education with the avowed objective of seeking ways to improve learning quality. Trust among the various stakeholders and professional judgement of teachers, administrators and school leaders were the main components of the organisational ethos of the NSP:

If schools are to operate effectively in devolved systems and in the circumstances described above, there needs to be a broad community understanding, reflected in system practice and discourse, that much reliance has to be placed on trust in professional judgment at the school level. (NPQTL, 1993: 13)

Trust and the professional judgment at the school level were seen as the essential ingredients for stakeholders within the educational system to be able to work together establishing a community that would ideally be able to understand and exert collaborative work.

The Review Panel, after conducting school observations, seminars and detailed interviews has concluded that the real purpose of the NSP is “to establish a more supportive regulatory and industrial environment, appropriate to the enterprise of schooling...” (NPQTL, 1993:14). The Review Panel sees the NSP then is somehow seen as an instrument that could potentially be effective in harmonising relationships among the stakeholders of the educational system. The Review Panel also implies that a situation of harmonious relationship among stakeholders in the educational system is conducive to reforms in schoolwork organisation leading towards improved teaching and learning.

Furthermore, the Review Panel believes that the effectiveness of the NSP hinges on the establishment of structures and organisations which would “reflect the locus of decision-making about the management and operation of schools...” (NPQTL, 1993:40). The Review Panel also asserts that a representative form of governance which involves all the “partners in the ‘work’ of schools” is also key in assuring the effectiveness of the NSP.

2. The Synthesis of the Reported Practices of the NSP (May 1994) is a direct follow-up of the initial evaluation review completed by the WOWP of the NPQTL in September 1993. The NPQTL’ WOWP had asked for a synthesis of the experiences of the NSP participants. Observations on teacher-based national seminars, reports coming from more than 170 schools in the NSP from all the eight states and territories of Australia and other relevant sources formed the bases of the report of the synthesis team. Thus, the Synthesis of the Reported Practices of the NSP can be considered as a "revisiting" of the September 1993 External Review of the NSP.

The synthesis team has posited that a post-NSP scenario should incorporate a new organisation with a new vision. "In this new vision, there is a central role for an informal network relying upon shared issues and interest." (Ladwig, et. al., 1994: 24) This informal network consisting of relevant stakeholders within an educational system will continue the work that the NSP had already started.

A significant role that informal education system networks can perform, as envisioned by the synthesis team, is to set the stage for a broad-based research and development environment. "Keeping in mind the obstacles faced by the NSP, it is the view of the synthesis team that the NSP has most clearly demonstrated its organisational potential as a national educational research and development project." (Ladwig, et. al., 1994: 45)

A research and development culture within the network would only be feasible if the appropriate environment can be sustained. "This can happen, however, only if teachers, schools, systems, and indeed whole states have collectively agreed upon a framework which creates a cultural space in which it is possible to make mistakes and to collectively and quickly learn from those mistakes." (Ladwig, et. al., 1994: 45)

The synthesis team has realised quite obviously the wealth of experience and expertise that could be tapped from among the NSP schools nationwide. "The potential exhibited by the NSP lies in the possibility that its collective learning could provide an empirical basis on which intelligent school restructuring decisions might be built." (Ladwig, et. al., 1994: 45) This is the main reason why the synthesis team argues for the post-NSP informal network to identify as one of its key functions the support for a research and development culture within the educational system.

The synthesis team underscores four main areas that deserve some consideration from among national policy makers in education. The first area deals with the success that the NSP has experienced in using collaborative structures in initiating reform efforts in education. The second area is concerned with the catalytic role of the NSP as crucial in facilitating a nationwide collaborative approach among different stakeholders of the educational system. However, the synthesis team also alludes to the catalytic role of the NSP as still relatively "under-utilised." The synthesis team assumes that more substantive results can be achieved via the catalytic role of the NSP. The third area looks at the need to balance the NSP's important catalytic role and its equally vital role as systems coordinator of the various efforts from the schools. The fourth area touches upon the issue on "equity" and the seemingly vague stance that NSP and its participants have shown in addressing the question. (Ladwig, et.al, 1994: 46)

3. The report entitled "Evaluating the Quality Schooling Program: Final Report" (April 1995) was an external review commissioned by the Commonwealth Government. The report was prepared by the Albany Consulting Group (Martin-Stewart-Weeks) and Ian Cameron Research (Ian Cameron). The report focused on the QSP itself rather than on the individual projects of the QSP. The report was undertaken in February and March of 1995 and was completed in April 1995. (Albany and Cameron, 1995:6)

The findings of the report focus on three main ideas, namely: (1) the apparent success of the NSP in accomplishing its objectives, (2) the need to continue the existence of the NSP or a variant of it and (3) the impetus to preserve the core values of the NSP. (Albany and Cameron, 1995: 2). This report generally coincides and agrees with the main findings generated by the Review of the National Schools Project of September 1993 and the Synthesis of the Reported Practices of the National Schools Project of May 1994.

This report also reinforces the observations made by the two previous reviews on the NSP regarding the apparent breakthrough of the NSP in adopting collaborative organisational structures. "It has created perhaps unique networks in education in Australia and brought together key stakeholders in ways that had not been attempted or pursued before." (Albany and Cameron, 1995: 23) Indeed, the grouping of diverse stakeholders in a network dealing

with education quality reform is quite a novel achievement in the history of Australian education.

The report also mentions fundamental changes occurring in some of the participating institutions of the NSP and the NSN. “There is strong anecdotal evidence (at least) of some significant and even radical reform to school organisation and the workplace dynamics in schools which have been sponsored by the National Schools Network.” (Albany and Cameron, 1995: 15) It is worth mentioning that the report identifies the NSN (which later eventually became the offshoot of the NSP) as a separate entity from that of the NSP, and is further described as a body that is actually accomplishing reforms to school organisation and workplace dynamics.

It might be appropriate, for example, to consider the possibility of creating an independent or semi-independent framework for a major, focused school reform program which has the capacity to be flexible, risky and challenging and which can harness a resource base that does not require exclusive public funding. (Albany and Cameron, 1995: 27)

It is interesting to take note of this recommendation from the Albany and Cameron report stipulating the possibility of creating an independent or semi-independent framework for school reform that has a resource base that does not require exclusive public funding. The proposal resembles the present day scenario of the NSN: semi-independent, flexible and almost devoid of public funding support.

## **Organisational Transformations and Holistic Reform**

The concluding section of this paper lists five varying viewpoints on the idea of achieving holistic reform in schools and in organisations. The first concept emphasises the need for coordinated teamwork above individual effort. The second idea treats school reform as a multi-level and multi-categorical framework. The third notion suggests that policies in education reform be seen as hypotheses. The fourth suggests the combination of centralisation and decentralisation as cutting-edge organisational approaches. The fifth highlights the argument that organisations are not found in a vacuum and thus need to collaborate.

### **1.Extraordinary Individual Efforts vs. Collaboration**

This concept states the weakness found in the NSP in “ that the NSP was often maintained through the specific significant efforts of individuals, particularly within some systems. Simply put, restructuring schools will not realistically produce self-sustaining options if extraordinary individual effort is what those options are built upon. The demands of coordinating school restructuring at a national level may help in maintaining realistic expectations of what is possible at the state level.” (Ladwig, et. al, 1994: 47) This first concept simply states that extraordinary individual effort as a springboard for education reform may not be feasible. On the contrary, the need to coordinate school efforts and the potential strength it provides is seen as the more plausible approach.

### **2.Multi-level & multi-categorical framework for school reform**

The second idea challenges the status quo in school reform by asserting that holistic reform transcends foci on technical and social aspects of individuals and institutions in schools. “Therefore the knowledge framework for school reform should be shifted from the traditional simplistic school effectiveness with focus only on technical and social functions at the individual or institutional levels to a multi-level and multi categorical conception of school effectiveness. “ (Cheng, 1998:222) Cheng argues for a more comprehensive, non-fragmentary and long-term approach to holistic school reforms.

### 3. Policies as Hypotheses; creating hybrids

Reformers who adopt a rational planning mode of educational reform sometimes expect that they will improve schools if they design their policies correctly. They may measure success by fidelity to plan, by whether predetermined goals are met, and by longevity. Such a technocratic and top down approach, however, slights the many ways in which schools shape reforms and teachers employ their “wisdom of practice” to produce pedagogical hybrids. .

We have suggested treating policies as hypotheses and encouraging practitioners to create hybrids suited to their context. Instead of being ready made plans, reform policies could be stated as principles, general aims, to be modified in the light of experience, and embodied in practices that vary by school or even by classroom. (Tyack and Cuban, 1995: 83)

Tyack and Cuban offer a refreshing perspective in tackling school reform. They propose that policies be treated as hypotheses and even encourages practitioners (teachers, principals and school administrators) to create policy modifications or “hybrids” applicable to their context. They subscribe to the notion that policies be general statements that may be adjusted according to the needs of each “school or even by classroom.

### 4. Dual approaches: centralisation and decentralisation

Our survey suggests that companies adopt a dual approach, simultaneously investing in hierarchies and networks, creating a new balance between centralisation and decentralisation. (Ruigrok, et.al, 1999: 43)

The dual approach which attempts to combine both centralisation and decentralisation as organisational modes is an innovative idea. Ruigrok et. al, base their suggestion on countless observations they have made of organisational behaviour and pattern in the European corporate world. Although, the context that the model is applied is within the corporate setting, the concept of combining both decentralisation and centralisation as organisational approaches are models that may be worth looking at if applied to educational systems.

### 5. No “firm” is an island

The described emergence of a network era is rapidly transforming our view of a firm. The global scale of operations, enhancing competition, and the complexity of technology have increased even the resource linkages between multinational corporations, to say nothing of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) into true interdependence. The electronic channels, together with powerful databases, have facilitated the management of organisational interfaces. No firm can afford to be a self-contained “island” any more; learning through relationships is crucial for the battle of the future. (Moller and Halinen, 1999:416)

Moller and Halinen emphasise an idea that is capital in the study and discussion of network types of organisations --- the indispensability of relationships among individuals and institutions. The truism of “no firm can afford to be a self-contained ‘island’” may well be applied to schools as well.

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