The Risk in Renewal: Building Whole School Resilience

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November 7, 2003.

This paper investigates what a democratic school governance model can do to break the negative pattern of top-down decision-making that leaves children and their communities without a say in the key determinants of their school experience.   If a school is hypocritical, talking hope but walking in defeatism, or espousing democracy while operating through autocratic systems, children will not want to find a voice to waste on the dysfunctional situation.

Studies of resilient children who grow against the odds to fulfilling adulthood have pointed to 'protective factors' that help children through the threats and risks of a competitive and often cruel world. Benard (1993; 1997) identified three key resiliency factors: *Positive and high expectations; Caring and supportive relationships;* and *Opportunities for participation in making meaningful decisions.* Seligman (1995) showed us that it is not protection that produces positive outcomes but rather it is risks faced and set-backs overcome. Only recently has community work theory begun to translate individual resiliency into collective dimensions (Healy, 2000). This article explores what it means for a whole school community to develop resilience.

While state systems try to impress a consistency across schools' development planning[1], the hidden casualty is *context.* Thomson (2000) reminds us of "the complex interplay of systemic and neighbourhood issues that come together in [disadvantaged] schools and demand a policy framework that not only meets their needs but sees their situations as they are" (p.167).   At a collective level, whole school resilience works with the context to provide conditions of organizational learning, mutual awareness and confidence. Without the conditions for innovative risk, for meaningful decisions (on locally agreed agendas) and expectations of whole school success, statewide initiatives can founder against the rock of contextual realities.

The literature of school reform is littered with problems identified in top-down systemic reform. Many of these are present in school communities with the little investment in middle-class conceptions of accountability and homogeneity (Thomson, 2000). The main problems are with *coherence, empowerment* and *authenticity.*

Coherence.   In attempting to impose coherence through systemic, one-size-fits-all accountability processes, the values and priorities of the local level are compromised. Internal coherence breaks down in schools characterised by unpredictable circumstances: higher staff mobility; gulfs between staff and family perspectives; and competing imperatives like quality vs survival, dedicated vs integrated learning, behaviour management vs academic development.

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[1] Dacin (1997) explains several types of pattern replication in organizational 'learning', each as an aspect of what he termed, 'isomorphism'. *Coercive* isomorhism is disempowering; *mimetic* isomorphism is subtle and orthodoxy-generating.

Empowerment.   Top-down mandates, no matter how 'cutting-edge' or devolutionary, are still identified as imposed. Being integrally linked to central accountability measures, individual schools fail to gain a sense of control over priorities, particularly communities that lack powerful forums, articulate lay leaders steeped in education and advocacy experience. Reaction rather than pro-action dominates planning as principals and senior teachers function as 'rescuer-experts' protecting staff under siege from work intensification caused by curriculum and assessment reform, with cycles of blaming at community level substituting for real, open-ended problem-posing and action-planning.

Authenticity: Broad scale testing that uses 'foreign', inauthentic instruments, although a problem in itself, is less of a concern for teachers than relevance of curriculum: Does it affect students' real learning histories; does it reflect their lived experience and draw upon their environmental and internal resources? How can educators measure what is really valued by the community's members? And if two heads are better than one, and if interdependence really is more productive than solo learning, how can social cognition be understood, planned and evaluated with students *and* their communities?

Insulted by down-loaded non-authentic accountability programs, lack of quality time for relevant professional development and poor recognition of their relative workload, teachers with 'creatively insubordinate' leaders have responded in many schools of the US to support bottom-up reforms that combine participatory governance, innovative school organisation and ambitious pedagogy (Bryk et al., 1998). In its attempt to give disadvantaged schools a chance to own their change processes, the US Department of Education has offered considerable funding to schools who take up 'Comprehensive School Reform' models. In Australia the equivalent innovative, locally-responsive process atrophied with the demise of the Disadvantaged Schools Project in 1996. This paper concerns a study of one 'mouse that roared', a school in Tasmania that has taken the risk of standing outside state mandates to seek resiliency rather than remediation. And it is showing how to do it without big injections of central, state funds or philanthropic funds.

The Mayfield ASP Project

In 1996, the University of Tasmania's Faculty of Education sought an opportunity to trial a Californian-sourced Accelerated Schools (ASP) school reform process. In partnership with the then US national centre for ASP at Stanford University, it persuaded the Tasmanian Department of Education to allow a Tasmanian primary school to take ASP as an alternative model of development planning to the Assisted School Self Review (now School Improvement Review or SIR).   In the role of change agent/researcher, I approached Mayfield Primary School, whose newly appointed and democratically minded principal agreed to seek consensus from his staff and community to embark on six years of ASP-style renewal.

The Accelerated Schools model of comprehensive school reform addresses school governance and curriculum through three guiding principles: Unity of Purpose; Empowerment with Responsibility; and Building on the Strengths. The model is well explained in website, www.acceleratedschools.net. The democratic, inclusive and consensual governance of ASP schools operates in three tiers. The *School as a Whole* (SAW) is self-selected from all stakeholders in the school community. Meeting once or twice a term, the SAW sets and reviews school Vision and priorities, and accepts or rejects any significant redirections in school policy. *Cadres* or inquiry teams are also self-selected from the inclusive range of member groups and meet weekly or fortnightly problem-pose and action plan around the school's agreed priorities. At Mayfield over six years of ASP involvement, two to three

cadres have been in place at any one time, covering mainly the areas of school/community relations and teaching & learning. Cadres use a data-based 'Inquiry process' (akin to collective action research) to utilise strengths in the context to name and meet educational challenges.

Research approach

In the participatory action research, there was a need to promote rich formative and summative evaluation of the process and of the learning that grew from it. That organisational learning encompassed student learning, professional learning and community learning. Data gathering was an iterative process of interviews, focus groups, ASP and home grown surveys that were most often analysed by collaborating groups of teachers and parents. Minutes of meetings and reports were 'interrogated' along with state wide and school-based student performance data and video footage of classroom teaching and school organisation.

Three research phases emerged over six years: an *establishment* phase from Aug 1996 to December 1997; a *consolidation* phase to December 2000; and the current phase of *self authored renewal* by the school from 2001 onward. This last phase represents the transition from fidelity to the ASP model to governance, organisation and pedagogical processes more shaped to Mayfield's local and state contexts.

Broad goals of the implementation

Mayfield is among the most disadvantaged areas in the State, and given that Tasmania has the highest unemployment rate in Australia, it is not surprising that over 75% of its 275 students receive school levy support. Although parents weren't aware at the time, in 1996 Mayfield's statewide test scores left them in the bottom 5% of school performance. Teachers had lost a sense of control over their own school's academic development and neither parents nor students had any clear role through which to enact change. Hence a key goal was to stimulate the school community as a whole to jointly set an agenda for change and collectively go about achieving it. Stringer (1992) pointed to the relative importance of contextual factors in learning. He cited Simons (1988): "No two schools are so alike in their circumstances for prescription of curricular action to adequately supplant the judgments of those who work within them" (Stringer, 1992, p. 67).

As this was to be the first 'transplanting' of the American ASP bottom up reform model to the southern hemisphere (it had reached Canada), another goal was to evaluate the usefulness of the ASP process in an 'exotic' context similar in levels of disadvantage to those communities that were implementing ASP in high poverty areas of the US, but within the more bureaucratised and centralised set of organisational conditions that characterises public education in Australia. Associated with this goal was an intention to interpret the compatibility of ASP with Tasmania's otherwise mandated ASSR (now SIR) standards-based planning and accountability processes.

Tackling the challenges

With the knowledge that some schools under ASSR were developing and finalizing partnership agreements between school and community in a period of weeks, Mayfield deliberately spent time to save itself grief in the long run. It took a complete year to build shared understandings about aspirations, strengths and challenges through the ASP processes of 'Taking stock', 'Forging a shared Vision' and 'Establishing agreed priorities'. Significant surprises emerged from the data of interviews, whole community brainstorms and class Y charts on 'what's good and what needs changing'. There were assumptions that were almost

folkloric among teachers at Mayfield. The figure below juxtaposes them with what the shared picture showed:

Figure 1. Taking stock: Assumed and discovered truths

Assumptions	Actualities from the data
Parents were overwhelmed and beyond caring	Parents cared but felt shy and without voice
Students were limited in their capacity	Students were limited by low expectations
People got the messages but just ignored them	People preferred visual and hands-on learning to the school's print-only diet
Parents needed empowerment more than any other member group	Teachers lacked voice just as much and were 'protected' by executive-managed agendas
Community anger would flow from the revealing of student failure	It did, but the transparency, participation and communication generated an earned trust

In this Establishment phase in which all participants (including myself) were coming to understand their school and the ASP model from a more informed perspective, a second home truth sank in, one that had both research and renewal implications in contexts of disadvantage like Mayfield. A depressing return rate of 3% to 185 family questionnaires (only three questions) sent me hustling to the local mini supermarket to ask that a new distribution of the questionnaire go out in the newspapers the next day. I was found the store sold only a handful of newspapers. "You don't read news here", the owner told me. "You watch it on the tube'.

Video Voilà

I went from red-faced change agent to green rookie video producer, asking the school to consider making a video about its teaching practices. This could be sent home with children *along with* a survey about what families thought of teaching and learning at Mayfield, what they might want to keep or change, and what they wanted for their children's education. With the help of TAFE video students, three 20 minute no-frills, no overdubbed, candid videos were produced showing learning activities the students thought their parents would be interested in. Five copies were produced per class and distributed on a rolling basis to all children over a week, along with the (two page) survey form. One hundred and sixty were completed and returned – a response rate of 86%!! This message about reaching out in an appropriate communication mode was to resound through the further four years of studying the Mayfield renewal process. If leadership is to have a distributed capacity, then each contributor and member group needs to be informed. Under distributed leadership, in Barry's (1991) terms, "it is assumed that each member has certain leadership qualities that will be needed by the group at some point" (p. 32).

Shorthand Outcomes

The six years of intensive participatory research has yielded volumes of organisational learning to which any motivated tough school can relate. That is carried in the thesis report of the entire study (Andrew, 2003). In this space, perhaps the best way to compact the findings is in a summary of the 'process outcomes' that speak to the challenges of coherence, empowerment and authenticity.

Coherence was both a generator and a product of three elements that coalesced to produce a robust, collectively shared picture. Leadership in the school was distributive, fiercely democratic. It also took risks by 'problematising' (Reitzug, 1994) every area of school

operations. The Principal showed confidence in the inclusive and inquiry-based governance processes of ASP to reach consensually powerful solutions. Every survey of teacher and parent perceptions strongly approved the Principal's democratic leadership during his 1997 to 2001 incumbency. This was not charismatic, stellar principalship, but courageous, empowering investment in the context's resources.

The ASP's invitation to school members to participate directly in setting the school's change agenda resulted in unheralded numbers of families at priority-setting and vision forging meetings (SAW). Where six mothers carried the total input of PTA meetings previously, some 36 families were represented in the meetings alongside all teachers and many students in their own time. Through this foundational consensus-building, an alignment of the school's key governance processes was set up:

Figure 2. Alignment of school decision-making and operational elements


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                    Shared picture
                         ↓
                       Goals
                         ↓
                     Baselines
                (strengths & challenges)
                         ↓
                     Governance
                         ↓
            School /workplace organization
    (Communication/transparency; empowerment; consensus)
                         ↓
        Inquiry-based action planning and learning
                   (for whole school )
                         ↓
           Authentic evaluation/shared picture
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This alignment was to develop as the school's 'modus operandi' during the consolidation period 1998-2000. It grew from the first year's groundwork to set up the tasks of the cadres (action-planning teams) which, by the way, comprised three groups of around eight members, with a ratio of five staff to three community members. One key 'organisational' change that has facilitated much reform activity has been the 'capturing of time' through extended classroom hours on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday in order that parents and teachers might meet together on Wednesday afternoons 'out-of-school-hours' from 2-4pm. Through this landmark initiative in Tasmania, and with after-school care provided to a number of students by rotations of staff, a huge cost saving is made in professional development and school community meetings.

Empowerment was initially a 'gift' of the principal's distributive leadership and the ASP processes' inclusive governance structure. The model enhanced member voices by outreach and listening, and through self-selection that honours diversity of input. In so far as autonomy contributes to resilience, the ASP forums provided *all* members opportunities for meaningful decision-making. Nevertheless, a second video production in 1999 provided feedback that helped staff and active parents understand more about constraints on direct governance participation, as in Cadres and SAW. The 20 minute video showed families an array of options for informal and formal involvement in the school's learning, governance and social life. A questionnaire accompanying the video asked families' members how they were most interested in school program participation and what could be done to help that. From the 54% return of surveys that accompanied the video home, we discovered that many families were limited in participation by shift work, night transport, lack of funds for child care, and

fear of the middle class educational milieu, a fear fresh in many young parents' experiences. Some were barely five years out of school themselves. Payne (1995) cautions that working class families show favour and concern in ways that are socio-culturally different to more demonstrable middle class displays of support. While middle class families make a thing of showing up at school meetings, working class families may be far more constrained. Respecting the cultural diversity of a school is critical to equitable community education. Cassanova (1996) cautions that "cultural homogeneity facilitates communication [but] the opposite is true as well, and educators need to be acutely aware of personal assumptions and their consequences" (p. 32).

Community learning through activity-based workshops has been very popular, and preferred-mode communication exchange has kept families' participation, if not on-site meeting engagement, high. One tell-tail indicator has been a rise from 25% attendance at parent teacher meetings in 1996 to over 75% in 2001 and 90% in 2002.

Authenticity in the learning program has been raised by three main means: goal setting, articulated interdependence, and multi-layered integrated curriculum (MLIC or 'powerful learning' in the terminology of ASP). Daily and weekly goal setting has promoted metacognitive perspectives on learning in early childhood and primary grades. It has also contributed to schoolwide resilience, setting ambitious but realistic expectations that are mirrored in the 'grand' expectation of the school Vision. Digital learning portfolios are created by upper primary students to enhance their IT skills, but largely to stimulate 'self-promotion' into 'possible futures' for students who tend to work in limited horizons. Interdependence has been taught as an explicit skill and raised as a mature attribute in all classes. Direct-taught helping behaviours, frequent class brainstorming for priority ambits, and the establishment of a Student Representative Council, all have given 'social cognition' a place in balancing the school's energetic early childhood and middle primary dedicated literacy and numeracy times. An essential part of ASP practice, 'Powerful learning' experiences have been collaboratively designed by grade teams, as integrated curriculum, with long term inquiry-based units designed mainly around Bloom's taxonomy and Gardner's multiple intelligences. These have been an ideal preparation for the current Tasmanian curriculum initiative of 'trans-disciplinary inquiry-based learning' in the *Essential Learnings Framework* (DoE, 2002), similar to the curriculum explorations of Queensland and South Australia.

Learning Outcomes

Mayfield's academic track record is one that families can 'take home and show off'. In 2002 it reached par with State literacy average performance on tested reading performance. This is not a result of 'powerful learning' alone - it is testimony to the capacity of ASP to find the data-based solutions to on-the-ground challenges, and to bring families into an informed awareness of the hope that resides in education and the community's self-belief. A majority of upper primary students have also demonstrated Information Technology competencies in excess of their Grade 7 peers in high school.

At the end of 2002, the local high school reported that, for the previous two years, none of Mayfield's 'graduates' were on the 'suspensions list' for Grades 7 & 8. Yet resilience is not easy to plot in the short term. It will take time and some clear- thinking transition studies to confirm or elaborate anecdotal success. Conditions for whole school and individual resilience have been given every opportunity to shape the personal futures of Mayfield's students. The following points show some of the influences on solo and collective resilience:

Figure 3. Conditions contributing to individual and whole school resilience

| Benard's (1997) Resiliency Factors	Individual	Organisational/ Whole School
Positive and high expectations	*From parent, teacher, mentor, club, reference group:* • Expressed confidence towards student-embraced goals • Goal setting	*From within locality/ membership:* • Vision-forging and priority-setting; *From broader reference groups (District, like schools, cluster):* • Accountability/standards
Caring and supportive relationships	*From anyone:* • Differences accepted • Someone who is there, reliable, listening, facilitating; • Sharing resources (not necessarily financial)	• Diversity honoured • Distribution/sharing of power, knowledge; • Member group to member group outreach and facilitation; • Reciprocity of hearing concerns and information; • Transparent and appropriate communication
Opportunities for participation in making meaningful decisions	*Anywhere:* • Seeing and making choices for self that shape one's 'life trajectory', • Say on what it is that matters; • Skills in negotiation, assertion and decision.	• Access to and participation in inclusive governance; • Skills/experience in advocacy and consensus • Design input to an authentic agenda (agreed priorities); • Gaining and employing an empowered voice

In the conditions outlined above, communication can be seen to have an importance beyond information dissemination—it is the substance and proof of trust, in turn the heart of social capital (Woolcock, 1998).   Social cognition and collective identity are counterintuitive to alienation but intuitive to resilience. The communal imperative in learning is captured by Darling-Hammond (1993, p.761) citing Dewey (1916):

> There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. [People] live in a community by virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common … Consensus requires communication … all communication (and hence all social life) is educative. (Dewey, p. 4-5)

Collective reflection takes time, trust and courage because through it the group is consciously destabilising its self-concept and self-worth.   Social cognition challenges the identity boundaries of members but serves to extend them far beyond the capacity of the individuals.

In Figure 4. I have presented each of the elements of Mayfield's renewal behaviour as linked by the critical dynamics of *communication* and *participation*. At the heart of the model, this interactivity creates the active capacity for organisational learning that sustains renewal.

Figure 4.   The synergy of renewal actions
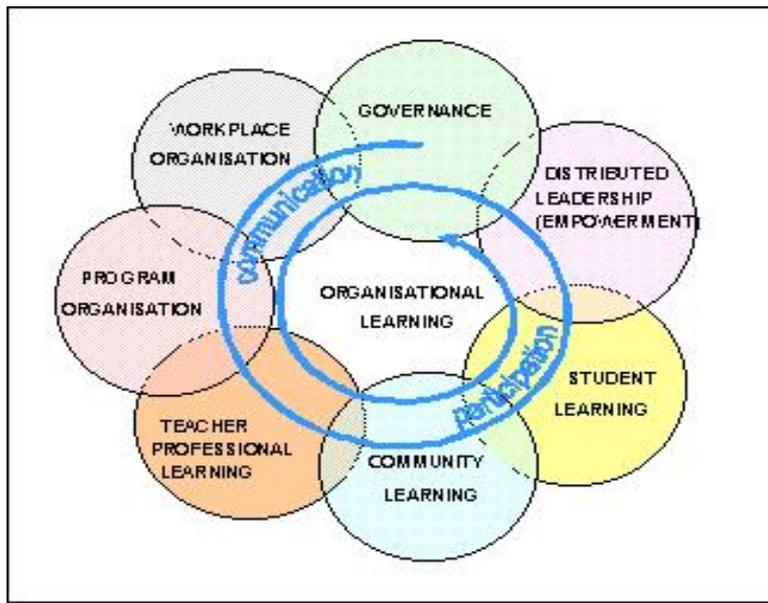
The benefits of dissonance

Mulford (2002) relates a metaphor of the bee colony, the paragon of systems. Although 85% of the hive's bees work the known nectar sources, 15% are serendipitous seekers of new sources. Without them, supply dries up. Sustainability is founded on stability but in an uncertain world, sustainability also requires risk and innovation.   The Mayfield ASP implementation has provided evidence of the applicability of the process to Tasmanian circumstances and quite arguably those of many Australian contexts. Comprehensive Schoolwide renewal models like ASP stimulate coherence to a school's operation; they foster empowerment across all member groups; and generate ambitious pedagogies to take learners beyond orthodoxies that bind them to disadvantage and lowered horizons

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