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The Australian National Schools Network

An Overview

2008

## **Australian National Schools Network**

The Australian National Schools Network (ANSN) has a long, successful history in school reform and improvement. The network is at the forefront of new thinking about learning, pedagogy, curriculum and school organization. It brings together teachers, schools, universities, teacher unions and government and non-government employers, as a unique, nationwide learning community.

### **Want to become a member?**

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## The ANSN

The ANSN is a not-for-profit national network of teachers, researchers, schools, systems, sectors, unions, universities, and community and business partners. It focuses on rethinking schools for a changing world.

It has six key objectives:

1. To connect teachers nationally as they explore and research new ideas and reflect on and reform their practices in order to support more effective learning.
2. To support schools and systems that are seeking to review, rethink and redesign their work over time.
3. To establish and maintain partnerships in education as we do our work with other stakeholders.
4. To support critical reflection on emerging trends in teaching and learning in Australia.
5. To learn from our work and to publish and disseminate findings from our research and practice.
6. To provide professional learning opportunities for those interested in learning about the practices that emerge from our work.

At its heart the ANSN is working towards a more socially just world in which the learning needs of all children will be met in safe and equitable learning environments. It focuses on social justice and on supporting schools that serve our most disadvantaged communities.

The ANSN supports the central role of the teacher in making a difference to student learning. It privileges ideas that are of interest and importance to teachers. It acknowledges and respects the voice of the teacher. It encourages the role of teacher as researcher in the classroom and the school.

The ANSN acknowledges the role of parents and care givers in the education of young people. It recognizes the importance of establishing partnerships with them, local community organizations and employers.

The ANSN acknowledges the important contribution of education systems and educational researchers to pedagogical knowledge and aims to identify and bring to the attention of teachers new thinking about learning, teaching, and school reform.

## Advocacy Role for the ANSN

The ANSN has a long history of participation in educational reform. As a dynamic learning organization, the network continually seeks ideas and identifies concerns expressed by teachers, principals, and educational leaders at all levels of the educational system across Australia, in both urban and regional areas. Through the network, we have learned much about the contexts and conditions required to sustain a passion for learning and promote student achievement.

Should the ANSN choose to engage in advocacy on systematic issues, the key areas could include:

1. Ensuring that the resources available for disadvantaged schools are appropriately matched to the needs of those schools.
2. Recognizing the complexity and power of external factors that impinge on student learning, and the need for external agents (parents, employers, community) to work with schools, by supporting a joint commitment to student learning.
3. Advocating for reforms to curriculum, pedagogy, supported by continuing professional development of teachers, in order to ensure that Australia's schools serve all students well.

The ANSN believes that all students are entitled to an education that is engaging and develops their capacity to access powerful knowledge across the major fields of human endeavour.

## Key questions for all in the ANSN

1. How would we know a class, a school and a system is working well and in a socially just way?
2. What kinds of schools make a difference to their communities?
3. What accountability systems can we develop that are valid and reliable and that all can accept and respect?
4. What are we learning about learning? Including what are we learning about student learning, teacher learning, school learning, and system learning?
5. What do we know (in a digital age) about how educators are learning and working together in a constructive and positive way?
6. What kinds of collaborations and partnerships are needed to do this work?

## The Work of the ANSN

The ANSN has a range of projects in which it is engaged; these have been grouped around the following themes:

1. Rethinking Schooling
2. Exploring new ideas and
3. Building capacity in schools and communities
4. Building the network

### 1. Rethinking schooling:

This project supports people in schools and systems to review rethink and redesign their work. Some of the questions we are interested in exploring are:

Who are the students we are trying to teach?

How might a large high school find out about each of its students?

In what ways might we personalise the school experience for students?

How does developing a reflective practice assist teachers to rethink their work?

How can we connect the work of students in school to the adult world of community and work? How does this help student learning?

How might we attain academic rigour for all students?

How do we get innovative examples of practice that work from beginning to end?

How do we extend our learning from such successful examples?

#### Current work includes:

- *Big Picture Australia and Big Picture Inspired Schools*
- *Connected Lives and Learning* (previously the RPIN Project with UniSA)
- *The ALIGN Project* with Assoc. Professor Deb Hayes and Ann King at Sydney University.
- *Teaching to Make a Difference* with Marg Vickers involving refugee students
- The ANSN is exploring how it might develop a project within Indigenous education
- The ANSN is exploring how it might develop a project around school-community partnerships.

The last two potential projects could be incorporated within the first three initiatives currently underway.

### 2. Exploring New Ideas and Technology:

This project connects teachers nationally as they explore and research new ideas and critically reflect on and reform their practises in order to become more effective. Current hubs of activity and projects include:

- *Habits of Mind Hub*
- *Dimensions of Learning Hub*
- *Classmates Project*
- *Numeracy across the curriculum project*
- *Authentic Assessment, Digital Portfolios and Exhibitions Hub*
- *Early Childhood and Technology Hub*
- *Interactive Whiteboards Hub*
- *Curriculum Planning Hub*
- *Teaching to Make a Difference Project*
- *Gendered Pathways in IT*

### 3. Building Capacity in Schools and Communities:

This project shares the practices that emerge from our work with schools and community in order to build their capacity to provide safe, equitable and effective learning environments. Current courses include:

- Leading Action Learning
- Cognitive Coaching
- Leadership to Change Program
- Protocol Training

### 4. Building the network:

This project works on developing new ways to create a more robust network capacity and to learn from that work. Current work includes:

- E-news and publications
- Web development
- Critical issues in education web forum
- Research and development work across projects and hubs
- National forums on key school education issues
- Networker development
- State, territory and regional development.

## ANSN Ways of Working

### Developing systems of influence<sup>1</sup>

1. *Networks*: These begin with teachers (and others) finding each other around a common interest, issue or problem. At this point people network for their own benefit and to develop their own work. There is fluid membership and people can and do, move in and out.
2. *Communities of Practice (CoPs)*: The groups can start to self organise. The ANSN research circles (hubs) facilitate the development of communities of practice. People share what they know and do this to support one another. They intentionally create new knowledge for their field of practice. People make a commitment to one another; they participate to serve the needs of others not just themselves and their focus extends beyond the group. The ANSN makes resources and knowledge known to others available to CoPs.
3. *Networks of Communities of Practice*. The ANSN facilitates different communities of practice helping them make connections with one another across state boundaries, across phases of schooling, between school and the community, between educators, systems of education and the public.
4. *Emergent Systems of Influence*: Through the network we know that change happens whereby efforts on the periphery suddenly become the norm. Members of the ANSN become leaders of the ANSN.

#### The ANSN does this by taking the following steps:

1. *Naming*. The ANSN recognises the pioneers of the work and their contribution to education, their work is brought to the attention of others and where there is interest, we support the sharing of that work.
2. *Connecting*. The ANSN connects people by designing and facilitating gatherings, by hosting networks where people can exchange ideas and resources, by using technology and co-creating products.
3. *Nourishing*. The ANSN provides ideas, mentors, processes, technology, and money. Learning and knowledge are the two key resources. The ANSN shares processes that work well and helps groups learn from experiences as people do the work. It puts the leaders of different networks and Communities of Practice together.

4. *Illuminating*. The ANSN publishes articles, it tells stories, it hosts conferences, and it visits sites of learning in order to develop relationships.

## Leadership in the ANSN

### The Coordinator<sup>2</sup>

People who lead in the ANSN are generally given the name Coordinator in their title. According to Sarason, coordinators:

- Get to know their context well.
- Perceive assets and notice strengths.
- Identify gaps and issues.
- Notice who needs resources, ideas and support.
- Connect people to other people.
- Connect people to the support they need.
- Are available and build strong relationships with those in their particular network.
- Have no formal power or authority.

So coordinators in the ANSN take the lead in thinking and doing around their interest. They take the lead by initiating the planning with others, by creating groups to meet and work together, by strong coordination and by ensuring the learning is documented.

## A Key Structure: The Hub

When significant interest in ideas and questions is shown by others, when these ideas and questions have the potential to support the purpose of the ANSN and when someone shows the interest and willingness to lead out on the focus in question then the ANSN creates a Hub. Hubs have a National Coordinator who works with a small team to lead the initiative on behalf of the ANSN. Hubs can generate a range of projects that can include: research circles, longitudinal research studies, workshops and seminars to seed interest, new publications and products for sale, online networks for ongoing communication and training and development activities based on what has been learned through the research circles.

<sup>1</sup> Wheatley, M., Frieze, D., (2006) *Using Emergence to Take Social Innovations to Scale*.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from: Sarason, B, S. (1997) *Crossing Boundaries: Collaboration, Coordination and the Redefinition of Resources: Jossey-Bass*

## The ANSN Research Circle

Given the ANSN's commitment to learning in community the main process for our work is the Research Circle. A Research Circle brings together colleagues with similar yet different research interests to work collaboratively using the rich experiences and expertise of others in the Circle to enhance the research being undertaken. This process:

- Supports innovation.
- Brings a richness of experience and expertise around a table.
- Provides a structure for colleagues to become both inquirers and researchers.
- Enables groups to learn from each other.
- Links the Circle with an expert (e.g., a university academic, process consultant or leading innovator in the chosen area of research) from outside the organisation to act as a critical friend or expert facilitator or expert in the field of interest.
- Provides access to a trained researcher.

## What happens in a Research Circle?

Research Circles are generally conducted in a series of two-day blocks. The structure varies. Groups come together between two to five times. The workshops are sometimes supplemented with schools visits by a critical friend. The initial two days are arranged to build the Circle, develop a shared understanding of each other's journey and to clarify the focus of the research for each group. New information about the focus of the research circle is provided to stimulate discussion, debate and ongoing exploration. An action plan is developed regarding the tasks people will undertake, the data that is required, how it will be collected and what actions each group will undertake between the first and second meetings of the Research Circle.

Participants come back together to share their story – what they did, what they learned and what they think now. People give feedback on others work and get feedback on their work. They reflect on the group needs and where necessary refocus their research question or their activities. Time is allocated to document the work.

The final two days are used to reflect on the journey to determine what has been learnt from the research, what

has changed and/or what needs to change. These days also assist groups to focus their action for the next 12 months and to build in a framework for review. All writing and reporting is done by the participants because ownership is important. It is their work, and hence their responsibility for the reporting process.

## Principles of Research Circles<sup>3</sup>

The process is intentionally interactive, exploratory and action learning focused. We aim to use the following principles for our work together:

- Engagement in an on-going program examination of work and learning.
- Engagement in inquiry which is informed by principles of social justice and which is directed towards improving learning outcomes for all students.
- Engagement in collaborative and democratic processes both in the development of the school based strategies and the interpretation of the data.
- Commitment to principles that give precedence to the questions generated in the school setting.
- Ownership of the results of the inquiry is jointly negotiated by the roundtable.
- Results are published only with the approval of the participants and with due acknowledgment of the contribution of all members and with respect for confidentiality where appropriate.

## The ANSN Norms<sup>4</sup> for working together

The Research Circle is encouraged to work under the 'Norms' listed below. These have been developed and used within the ANSN for nearly 20 years.

- Adopt a sense of responsibility in and for the group.
- Attend to others and listen.
- Cooperate in good faith.
- Confront problems and differences of opinion respectfully.
- Accept where others are at.
- Allow and give no put downs.
- Suspend judgment.
- Share ethically.

<sup>3</sup> Harradine, J (1997) *Research Circles in the National Schools Network*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> White, V et al (2001) *The Heart of Teaching How we can use student work to strengthen our professional practice?* ANSN.

## Three levels of intention, action and impact<sup>5</sup> of a research circle

- 1. Individual participation** – participants learn from their own experiences. Teachers and leaders research their own work. The learning is directed by the individual. Individuals work and learn to describe existing theories and to develop new theories underpinning their actions enhancing their personal practical knowledge.
- 2. Working with a group** – participants do this work with others for support and challenge for their learning but also to provide support and challenge for others in the group. Further working as a group creates new learning that individuals can adopt, adapt and try out.
- 3. For the benefit of community** – sharing learning with wider community and for the new actions to help a community achieve better outcomes for more people.

## How the ANSN, a not-for-profit organisation raises funds

In the context of all of our work we are aware that this is a network that needs to raise money to be able to do its work.

### We do this through:

- a. Memberships by systems, sectors, unions, schools, districts and regions, individuals and organisations.
- b. Working through large scale projects by tender or request and sometimes through collaboration with other not for profit and profit organizations.
- c. Paid work directly with schools with discounts for ANSN members.
- d. Advertised seminars, workshops and courses with discounts for ANSN members.
- e. Sale of products that get created through our work with teachers.
- f. Donations from interested people, groups and organisations.

## Want to become a member?

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<sup>5</sup> Hogan, J., (2001) Presentation on Action Learning, QTP Project, WACA referenced in ANSN QTP Action Learning Kit The Reflective Teacher, DETWA and the ANSN.



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