



in Alliance

THE ALLIANCE OF GIRLS' SCHOOLS (AUSTRALASIA) LTD
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SPECIAL ISSUE

in Alliance

*The Alliance of Girls'
Schools (Australasia) Ltd*

President:

Barbara Stone
MLC School, NSW

Executive:

Beth Blackwood
PLC, WA

Lesley Boston
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Girls' High School, Vic
Carolyn Grantsklans
Wilderness School, SA

Carolyn Hauff
Clayfield College, Qld

Susan Just
Ipswich Girls'
Grammar School, Qld

Ann Mildenhall
Diocesan School for Girls
New Zealand



*A report following the Annual Conference of the
Alliance of Girls' Schools (Australasia) Ltd*



*'Knowing
Women:
Growing
Girls'*

23 - 25 May, 2003



Dear Colleagues,

Our Annual Conference, held in May this year offered a rare opportunity for leaders from over 80 girls' schools to engage in shared cross-sectoral reflection on recent research, best practice and scholarship.

196 participants took up the challenge to involve themselves in learning conversations with peers with similar job responsibilities. In so doing they generated much of the data from which this report has been shaped.

Often conference organisers choose a rapporteur whose task it is to take the final session and highlight for the attendees the main ideas on learnings that have surfaced from the time spent together.

Our request to Professor Groundwater Smith was for a rather more substantial "plenary session", one which would provide a more enduring record, one which would enable even those who were not able to attend the conference to share our deliberations, one which would provoke the important conversations to continue.

I hope you'll agree with me that she has done all of this and more. This special edition of "in Alliance" is much more than just a Conference Report; it is a valuable support for all leaders of girls' schools in their continuing professional learning.

Barbara Stone

Barbara Stone,
President



PROFESSOR SUSAN GROUNDWATER-SMITH

Professor Susan Groundwater-Smith holds honorary appointments in Education at the University of Sydney, the University of Western Sydney and the University of East Anglia in the UK. She currently co-directs the Centre for Practitioner Research at the University of Sydney with Professor Judyth Sachs. Susan's enduring interest is in evidence based practice in education. She supports the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools in their work in practitioner enquiry. In particular she is Researcher in Residence at MLC School; a relationship of over five years standing. She presents on practitioner research in conferences both in Australia and overseas, most recently at the British Educational Research Association in Edinburgh and the European Conference on Educational Research in Hamburg. She is the senior author of a number of books, including *Teaching: Challenges and Dilemmas* and *Secondary Schooling in a Changing World*. Her most current publication, arising out of the work of MLC School and the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools, *Learning to Listen: Listening to Learn* (coauthored with Nicole Mockler) has been well received both in Australia and Europe and has led to an affiliation with the British Networked Learning Communities sponsored by the National College for School Leadership. Susan believes that those Australian Schools working within a framework of evidence based practice are equal to any that she has encountered and in many ways are leading the field.



THE PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

Browse the world wide web for conferences in education and you will find them in their hundreds.

Conferences whose purposes are to disseminate research on such diverse matters as: artificial intelligence in education, welcoming complexity, provision for young offenders, e-learning, developing literate societies, providing for students with disabilities, all jostle each other for the browser's attention. These conferences are multi-functional in that they are designed to reach academics, and also are intended to bring research studies and scholarship to practitioners and leaders in the field. Such was the nature of 'Knowing Women: Growing Girls', the annual conference of the Alliance of Girls' Schools, reaching out to educational professionals across Australia, New Zealand and South-East Asia.

However, this conference was one that not only provided opportunities for participants to hear a range of well-crafted presentations, and develop relationships and networks (important as these functions are) but also focused on professional learning. To this end a rapporteur was appointed to document the proceedings and collate the reflections gathered during the structured discussions that had been built into the conference framework.

This report, then, has as its purpose to support that ongoing professional learning by providing both an account of the proceedings and recorded discussions as well as developing a series of "provocations" that may be used in stimulating on-going discussion.

To this end the report will document each component in the order in which it was presented with a brief following commentary and provocative question(s). It will then collate the responses gathered during the reflective discussions. Finally, it will draw some conclusions about the nature of the conference itself.

Professor Stephen Kemmis, a well-known and respected advocate for connecting academic and field practices in education, presented the Lawrence Stenhouse Memorial Lecture at the fifteenth annual conference of the British Educational Research Association. In it he discussed the educational conference as a metapractice and argued that we require a *substantive relational* view of power that permits an analysis of how the means and modes of production influence and affect how conferences are constructed and operated. He argues, *inter alia*:

Consider the example of an educational conference. It provides evidence about the working relationships between academic researchers and classroom practitioners both through the content of papers presented and through the forms of work which bring participants together. . . . We might ask for example: Who is present, what work do they report? Whose work is described in papers presented? Whose interests are served in the process of reporting? What are the material practices of data-gathering in the research being reported? To what kinds of matter are they sensitive, and to what kinds of matters are they insensitive? How do they represent the life and work of education? How are they permeated by the values and interests of particular groups? . . . (Kemmis, 1995, p.99)

Questions such as these will inform the portrayal that follows, with just one significant caveat – the portrayal necessarily reflects the subjectivities of the writer – those issues upon which she has focused may vary from those of other participants in the conference; her interpretations will have been influenced by her own educational research history; her representations depend in part on the language of practice that she normally employs. She asks her readers to readily adopt what Ralston Saul ((1993) has called "the virtue of doubt".

The portrayal also makes the distinction between research and scholarship. A number of the presentations were based upon empirical inquiry while others were based upon a scholarly investigation of an idea or practice. Philipson & Wergin (2003) in their review of a text that addressed the nature of research in education differentiated the two in this way:

For most people research is the act of discovering or reinterpreting knowledge through structured inquiry while scholarship is much broader, a way of being or professing, like professing a faith or love for someone. (p.62)

The Conference presentations of Drs Ken and Kathy Rowe, Dr Kris Needham and Mr Bill Topin all fall into the category of research, albeit varying in scope and context, as does Dr JoAnn Deak's – although, as I shall argue later, Dr Deak's work is more of a meta-analysis of the research in the field of girls' learning and investigations of the ways in which the brain operates. Ms Barbara Lepani's and Associate Professor Alma Fleet's papers grow out of scholarly inquiry. Clearly the conference opening falls into neither, but it is important to include it here because it created the ambience within which the conference was played out.



THE CONFERENCE OPENING

Loreto Kirribilli stands above Sydney Harbour and affords glimpses of that shining waterway. This was an apt spot for the indigenous welcome to delegates that offered a salutary reminder that we were indeed privileged to be in such a place. In her introduction to the conference the President of the Alliance, Mrs Barbara Stone, indicated to participants the scope and range of the organisation and emphasised that delegates had come from as far afield as Singapore, New Zealand and South Africa.

The official opening was undertaken by the Honourable Margaret Ackary Stone, a judge of the Federal Court of Australia and Chair of the Governing Council of Ascham School. Taking up the theme 'Knowing Women: Growing Girls' it was pointed out, in the opening address that there are many continuing challenges facing women in Australian Society. Whereas in New Zealand women occupy positions of great power, such as the Prime Minister and Chief Justice, there are no such women leaders either in the Australian Federal Parliament or the High Court. She enjoined the conference to work to encourage an optimal environment for girls to exercise leadership. She indicated the importance of networks and the ways in which they could operate to mentor and support young women on the cusp of their development.

The speaker referred to the "tragic choices" that women often have to make. She argued that while they might be led to believe that they could do "everything, anything and all at once" the reality was that the consequences of choosing one thing over another, one role over another, one career over another, disguised the fact that there were costs to pay and that women were highly vulnerable to feelings of failure. She believed that young women, in their defence, resorted to apology; but, the fundamental problem lies in the unrealistic expectations that there is a belief that the successful career can be readily balanced with maintaining a successful family. "Every day they (the women) feel the weight of compromise." Increasingly, it would seem, young men also are facing similar dilemmas.

While compromises are inevitable the speaker proposed that it is vital that women are aware of them and feel comfortable with them – that, in effect, they learn to make choices knowingly and take responsibility for those choices. On this note, the Honourable Margaret Stone wished the conference well.

In her response the President indicated that the conference was one that was research-based both in terms of the research and scholarship underlying the presentations and the recording of the conference as a research act.

COMMENTARY:

The matter of encouraging girls and young women to believe that they can achieve 'anything they like' as long as they are there for their families has been poignantly captured in the research of Aveling (2002):

While they (the young women interviewed) have demonstrated they can succeed in male terms, the culture of the workplace ensured that despite equal opportunity strategies and despite these women's hopes that their lives would be substantially different from those they had seen their mothers leading, their work patterns essentially replicated the employment patterns of women of an earlier generation. (p. 277)

PROVOCATION:

How can we develop resilience among girls and young women, such that they have aspirations that will ensure that they fully employ their talents and skills in the broader workplace, but that they will also be able to engage in the domestic sphere in ways that are pleasurable and satisfying?

KEYNOTE ADDRESS - Building Strategic Fences at the Top of the Cliff

The first invited address of the conference was presented by Dr Kathy Rowe, a Senior Consultant Physician at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne and Dr Ken Rowe, Principal Research Fellow, the Australian Council for Educational Research. Their paper focused upon auditory processing difficulties affecting children's literacy progress during the early and middle years of schooling. The address built upon key findings from recent clinical, educational and physiological research conducted by their respective bodies.

The presenters explained that their work was not specifically directed towards girls and their achievements, but rather was concerned more generally about teaching and learning being based upon a sound understanding of what may underlie disruptive, inattentive behaviours in the classroom and under-achievement, particularly in the area of literacy.

They argued that educational research should be useful research and if not used then it is something “of a crime”. The particular research to which they turned was concerned with auditory processing, which is the ability to hold, sequence and process what is heard. They are most concerned with how children hear, hold information in their heads and then understand what is being asked of them. They argued that auditory processing problems are among the most common of processing problems. Importantly, such disabilities are not necessarily because there is an impairment to the children’s hearing acuity but because there is a reduced capacity to actually process streams of sound such as speech.

In their research the Rowses have found that the young learner needs to be able to process at least four or five chunks of information in order to be able to read fluently. Teachers need to be alert to both the ways in which they form and deliver instructions in their classrooms and to the fact that auditory processing is developmental, with younger children not able to respond to long and convoluted instructions. They pointed out that teachers who do not make adjustments to fit their students’ needs will contribute to the students missing basic information and seeing themselves as dumb. As they lose confidence it is highly likely that such students will become disruptive in the classroom.

Teachers can be trained in the identification and diagnosis of auditory processing. Following an investigation involving 1118 children and 38 trial schools a number of strategies have been developed. These include: attracting the child’s attention; using short sentences; pausing between sentences; maintaining eye contact; waiting for compliance; setting up routines; restating instructions simply; using visual cues; and, monitoring the child’s response. The focus is upon the teachers changing their behaviours rather than labelling the child as one exhibiting behavioural difficulties.

As an illustration of the experience of students, the Rowses spoke of children spending much of their time in classrooms “bobbing up and down like corks in a sea of teacher-generated blah”. Since, it was claimed, auditory processing difficulties are experienced by some 20% of children, adapting teacher behaviours is essential for the development of their literacy skills, not to mention their self-esteem. Finally, the Rowses emphasised that by adapting teacher behaviours, it was not only the case that those experiencing difficulties improved; but also that the changes led to general improvement for all children in the class.

COMMENTARY:

The Rowe presentation was detailed and based upon what Tooley (2001) has suggested are the criteria for useful research. These he characterised in a set of questions:

- Is the argument coherent and lucidly expressed?
- Do the conclusions follow from the premises and argument?
- Are unfamiliar terms adequately defined and assumptions clearly set out?
- Are concepts used consistently?
- Are primary sources used?
- If empirical propositions are introduced are references for them given?
- If controversial empirical and non-empirical propositions are introduced is their controversy acknowledged?
- Is the relevant literature adequately surveyed?
- Is the argument free of partisanship? (p. 130)

In terms of controversy, Ken Rowe acknowledged that the Victorian Department of School Education had some difficulties with the research as it related to the acquisition of literacy and the literacy practices that they were advocating for schools. This may well arise from concerns regarding the operational definition of literacy itself. As the many papers in Larson (2002) would testify, reading is a complex, multiple, situated, social and cultural accomplishment and there is no one “silver bullet” that will ensure that all children become readily literate.

However, there can be little doubt about the technical adequacy of what was presented to us. Camarata & Nelson (2002) claim that the goal in generating progress in language function should be to diagnose on the basis of sound evidence and develop treatments that result in advances in the underlying skills. They see auditory processing as a functional receptive language skill that must be considered when evaluating cognitive abilities and attainments. Clearly the Rowses’ study takes us a considerable way along that path.

PROVOCATION:

How can we support teachers in being alert to those students who may be experiencing auditory processing difficulties, while at the same time not reducing the richness of the classroom language? And, is the assumed model of classroom practice one which is teacher centred? How might the study look in classrooms where students have greater agency?



PLENARY PAPER - Harnessing the Power of the Mind

The first conference plenary paper was presented by Ms Barbara Lepani, an Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Innovation and International Competitiveness (ACIIC) the University of Sydney. Ms Lepani is a social futurist and consults with various arms of commerce and industry to support them in addressing rapid social and technological change. ACIIC is itself located in the Department of Engineering and in some ways engineering can be seen as a metaphor for what needs to be undertaken if we are to redesign our lives in order to become effective citizens of the future.

As a practising Buddhist Ms Lepani is concerned that we harness the power given to us in this life to develop what she calls “a pedagogy of wisdom”. Wisdom, is seen as being beyond cleverness. Using the example of *The Empire Strikes Back* Ms Lepani argued that Luke was being trained in wisdom through his exposure to “the force”. In a different context Einstein adjured us to free ourselves from our prison of desires and limited affection. It is an anomaly that in the modern world there are rising levels of mental suffering in the context of increasing material affluence. Ms Lepani reminded us that economic growth will not solve our problems in and of itself; instead we need social capital, emotional intelligence and spiritual intelligence. These all form the sum of what needs to be developed and integrated if wellbeing is to be experienced.

It was suggested that all too often we project our existing concepts and emotions onto the phenomena that we experience. We need to release our mind’s tendency to fixate and fix on rapid and easy solutions. Ms Lepani argued for a “pedagogy of wisdom” which captured the power of focus, awareness, wisdom and compassion. In her work with a Sydney Independent Girls’ School she had been able to demonstrate that students in Years 8 and 11 who were experiencing learning difficulties found a great relief from the “constant dispersal of attention” that came their way in their more conventional classrooms.

The presentation discussed the problematic nature of entanglement, where our wants and fears constantly interact. We want praise, but we fear blame; we want recognition, but we fear being ignored; we want gain, but we fear loss; we want pleasure and happiness, but we fear pain and suffering. These entanglements arise from the obstacles to the obtaining of wisdom. Mindfulness is prevented by distraction; spaciousness in thinking by being squeezed; seeing broadly by being fixated; understanding interdependence by seeing only the separate parts; having the courage to embrace by fearful, self protective behaviours; taking a long term view by short term pragmatics; holding the main points in our minds by suffering “information pollution”.

In spite of these obstacles Ms Lepani believes we can be trained in wisdom. We can develop generosity, patience, discipline, diligence, commitment, and focus. Most importantly we must avoid being “mentally autistic”. Pride can be transformed into humility, ignorance into open mindedness, anger into patience and compassion, desire into contentment and appreciation, envy into joy. This can be achieved by having wise mentors and teachers, using tried and tested methods, and being participative in a community of friends, “learning and walking the path of wisdom and compassion”.

COMMENTARY:

In his inaugural speech of 1994 Nelson Mandella concluded: “As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” To many pragmatists in our globalised world the word “wisdom” is anathema. Their aversion to it lies in a belief that it cannot be commodified and therefore has little value. It will take courage to develop a pedagogy of wisdom.

PROVOCATION:

Taking account of Ms Lepani’s address it is clear that the getting of wisdom is no short-term easy matter. In an overcrowded curriculum; how can a school accommodate these ideas? What will be the costs if it does not?

PLENARY PAPER - Reggio Emilia

Associate Professor Alma Fleet is an early childhood specialist leading the Institute of Early Childhood at Macquarie University. She introduced the conference participants to the preschool program of the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy by reflecting first upon the words of Ursula le Guin: “Good ideas are like grass, they thrive from being walked upon.” An important precept governing the work of Reggio Emilia schools is that young learners are powerful learners and they deserve a powerful and engaging curriculum. This confronts many of the basic assumptions currently governing, not only early childhood education, but school education more generally, where the belief is that young learners cannot deal with complex, abstract ideas. Professor Fleet introduced us to the beginnings of the schools in the period shortly after World War II. For the farmers and their wives in the province it was clear that in some ways education had failed them. How else to explain that brutal and terrible war. When Malaguzzi came upon those people cleaning their bricks, intent upon building their own school a powerful force was born. As he listened to what they had to say he committed himself to be an educator who would be worthy of them and their children.

So what is so distinctive about the Reggio Emilia schools? Professor Fleet enumerated some key characteristics: all participants in the educational community, including the children and their parents are respected; listening and collaboration are key ideas; time is not a commodity to be broken into tiny discrete parts, but a gift to be used carefully; the aesthetic is to be valued; complexity in ideas and relationships is to be sought out and nurtured; there is to be a valuing of the unexpected.

Reggio Emilia is not just a place, it is a state of mind. It resonates to the work of Dewey and Vygotsky. This is clear from the joint project with Howard Gardner’s Harvard Project Zero (Giudici, Rinaldi, & Krechevsky, 2001). At its philosophical core the metaphor is that of the doorway: “Look beyond what you see at first; look for the unexpected.” In spite of some resistance from the church the schools have been successful in developing the skills in young children to think and challenge.

Professor Fleet indicated that these things do not happen by chance but are contributed to by the learning environment developed for the children. Every architectural decision is based upon the philosophy of the program. Tools are of quality: “We don’t find yoghurt containers or colouring-in at Reggio.” Literacy is practical: “Letters are not written for letters’ sake, they are written because they are important communications.” One will not find numbers of duplicates of the same work and images in Reggio classrooms. Instead there is what is known as “pedagogical documentation” where samples of work are thoughtfully analysed: “What goes up on the wall is more than a display.”

As an example of the nature of the work, a unit where children investigated shadows was presented.¹ It was a particularly salient example because it demonstrated the involvement of the local community. Parents manufactured light tables and assisted in the development of shadow screens. Reggio Emilia builds upon strong partnerships with parents involved in their children’s learning.

Having extolled the work of the Reggio Emilia schools Professor Fleet was concerned that there was a real danger in the processes being trivialised, “we are doing Reggio” without sufficient understanding of the processes or philosophy. She saw that some were using their Reggio-like-work as a marketing tool and were often ignorant of the possibilities that the pedagogy offered.

COMMENTARY:

Giudici, Rinaldi, & Krechevsky, 2001 note that the work of Reggio Emilia is ecological, and attempts to make a close connection between human relationships and our relationships with knowledge. They noted “our aim is to build philosophical and value related horizons that are closely interwoven with the emerging culture.... It (Reggio) embodies and develops an organic, multi-disciplinary approach whose nature is both cognitive and ethical. It is a way of living and thinking together that directly and deeply involves the cultural and didactic content.” (p. 57)

PROVOCATION:

In an educational world governed by outcomes and micro-indicators how do we develop the kind of sustained, integrated inquiries that Reggio Emilia models for us? How do we turn our learners into genuine young scientists and artists?

¹ A full account of this can be found in Giudici et al (2001)



JOB ALIKE - Session 1

Following this first suite of plenary presentations and the first keynote address participants divided into groups depending upon their roles and responsibilities in the schools. Principals, Heads of School, Directors of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning and Members of School Councils, met to consider the ideas that resonated for them, the implications for policies and practices and the key words and phrases that remained in their minds following the presentations. Twelve reflective booklets were returned.

Rather than merely listing the responses they have been collected together in groupings. Direct quotes from booklets are indicated by inverted commas.

DRS KATHY & KEN ROWE:

Ideas that resonate for us:

Many of the participants believed the presentation was “Speaking common sense to us”. By that they suggested that the practicality, simplicity and clarity of the testing procedures and the professional development of teachers was appealing and would enable the identification of children with auditory processing difficulties. It was agreed that too often assumptions are made about children and their abilities (or apparent lack of them) based upon flimsy evidence. When children are experiencing difficulties and these are not addressed it is likely that they will fall further and further behind. “Some kids who are disenfranchised could be engaged if we modify teaching practices.” One group wondered about the accumulated effects upon senior students: “What is the impact, long term on Years 8 to 11?”

Generally there was agreement that there was too much teacher talk in the classroom. However, there were mixed views regarding the nature of the talk. It would seem that the presentation placed some emphasis upon direct instruction rather than the classroom where children were more involved in their own learning. (In one instance a link was made contrasting the Rowe and Fleet presentations.) Some were concerned that teachers would resile from using rich and complex language in the classroom. “Keeping it simple produces a tension in contrast to rich learning situations and complex ideas.” Others wondered about whether being able to repeat back actual words were a real indication of an understanding about what had been said, “are there not different implications between accurate recall and the comprehension of a message?”

Generally, it was seen that groups resonated to a belief that greater attention needs to be paid to pedagogy – too often the emphasis has been upon the curriculum. Even so, there were some different views upon what constituted good classroom practices. One group, for example, was concerned about teachers’ thinking about how children learn. A

number of groups had discussions regarding teacher preparation both in pre-service and in-service programs and the effects on learning. Several observed that teacher preparation was not as focused as it had been in the past. “We have lost some good direct instruction teaching practices.”

Almost every group noted that quality teachers make a difference for all children, not only those with learning difficulties: “Improved communication with auditory processing in mind will benefit all, not just those with difficulties.” All teachers need to take responsibility: “All teachers need to be aware. Often it is just the special needs teacher who has to take responsibility.”

In turning to the research itself a number reflected upon their surprise that so many children had auditory processing difficulties. “It (the presentation) dispelled the myths of norms for what 5 – 7 year olds can hold/recall and work with.” Some wondered about the motivation of the children to take the test and the meaning it might have for them. Nonetheless, it was clear that these provocative ideas had an impact on all groups. While many felt that this session held little relevance for Girls’ schools they could see that there might be a need to change some aspect of pedagogy.

Implications for policy and practice:

A number of groups could see that the test could act as a simple screening device for new intake students and that teacher professional development was essential. “In a school that focuses on evidence-based practice, the processes are clear enough for the teachers to undertake the research and diagnosis.” They not only wanted the teachers to know how and why to administer the actual test, but also to examine their speech more generally in classrooms. “We need to support teachers in changing pedagogy and understanding what kind of teacher talk is valuable and what is not.” They also wanted their teachers to be discriminating in deciding when and where clear, direct, simple language is appropriate and where other forms may be desirable. “When is richness of language needed, warranted and effective?” They wanted their teachers to think about themselves as “effective and appropriate communicators”. They also wanted to nurture teachers to become better listeners.

Three implications were: teacher professional development is significant, auditory processing problems relate to classroom management and auditory processing involves one kind of learning style.

While all groups expressed a view that some follow up professional development was essential there were several that were guarded about finding yet another label to attach to students. “We are at risk of producing more labels.”

“We categorise children who don’t conform too easily as behaviour problems.” Some believed that problems could be alleviated by having some additional strategies, both related to talk and some supplementary cues. “We need to map our plans in terms of delivering manageable chunks as an aid to understanding.” “Short instructions could be written on a whiteboard.”

Key words and phrases:

Five groups recorded “Sea of blah” and “Chunking” as key words and phrases. “Listening” was recorded by four and “Hearing” and “Relationships” by two. “Her voice was always there,” was also noted by two. Single responses pointed to: “It’s like learning a foreign language”, “Would you want your children taught by you?”, “Get attention”, “Pausing”, “Acting out behaviour – what is happening to that child?” and “Short and simple”.

MS BARBARA LEPANI:

Ideas that resonate for us:

A number of groups indicated that they found the idea of leading students along the path to wisdom was both appealing and appropriate. “We need to acknowledge that there is a spiritual dimension to living.” They saw that in an age so beset by materialism, problems and anxiety, that trap hopes and fears, it was timely to think about “well-being and a sense of spirituality”.

It was noted and applauded that Ms Lepani’s ideas were not related to “a dogma of religion”; but rather intended to lead students to have a balance and wholeness in their lives that released them “from the zombie zone” and “the zone of entanglement”. Groups valued the emphasis on SQ and the need to nurture and have compassion for the authentic self as well as others. Too often schools have been “caught in the ‘having’ and ‘doing’ needs, and don’t get to the ‘being’ needs”.

It was seen that a pedagogy of wisdom means that the curriculum has to be more than just that which meets the requirements of such examinations as the HSC and VCE or established outcomes based frameworks “that provide little room for anything other than an incidental development of wisdom”. Schools have too often “been captured by cleverness” and a focus on the individual. The presentation emphasised the individual in the community rather than in isolation. As well, it was noted that for some students it is more important to be “cool” than be “wise” and so some resistance could be encountered.

However, a pedagogy of wisdom was seen to enable the “converting of righteous anger, not into revenge, but positive responses”.

Some suggested that schools will need to be cautious in ensuring that in their adoption of a pedagogy of wisdom,

there is not a conflict with existing school and parental values: “Schools will need courage to hold on.”

Implications for policy and practice:

It was broadly agreed, across groups, that a pedagogy of wisdom could be enacted within a life skills program, and that it could work to enhance student self image, particularly (but not exclusively) for those students at risk for one reason or another. It would seem that many students are disconnected from community and this could be a way forward, but it would be important not to treat the matter at a superficial level. It was thought that some specific attention would need to be paid to silence and reflection given the busy world of the classroom and beyond. This would assist in “bringing balance into school life”. However, there are some risks involved as “new problems will be opened up that require compassion and tact”. “We shall need more trained counsellors if we open this Pandora’s box.”

Any such program would require specific professional development for teachers and parents who may be unaccustomed to the central ideas. “We shall need to ensure that all the ingredients are there for the getting of wisdom.” It would also require a re-examination of the curriculum. As is so often the case with the introduction of something new many wondered about from where the time would come. As well, it was seen that processes within schools can contribute to the very anxiety they are seeking to dispel, such as award systems – “the school’s basic values will need to be addressed”. Several groups indicated that they would need some focus on how as well as on what. One group imagined that it would be important for the teachers as a community to model the values to their students.

Key words and phrases:

The phrase “Pedagogy of wisdom” was mentioned by five groups. One group did wonder whether students could distinguish between knowledge and wisdom. “Compassion for self” struck a chord in four groups. “Captured by cleverness” was cited three times, as was “Entanglement”. “SQ” and “Downshifting”. “Balance” and “the Zombie Zone” were nominated by two groups. All of the following were mentioned by one group: “Anxiety is the trap of hopes and fears”, “Concentrate while remaining spacious”, “Beyond the prison”, “Autistic in relating to others”, “No such thing as wasted time”, “Tricks of perception”, “Quote from Einstein”, “Community – friends walking together”, “Trust”, “Courage”, “Modelling – walking the talk”, “Living harmoniously in a global environment”, “Life long learning” and “Resilience”.



JOB ALIKE - Session 1 (continued)

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR ALMA FLEET:

Ideas that resonate for us:

The key ideas of valuing the unexpected, developing provocations and seeking for complexity were important to most groups. It was believed that there is a “general underestimation of what it is that young children can achieve” and “honouring what it is that they (the children) know and understand”. The challenge was seen to be to develop a coherent, child centred curriculum where teachers act as facilitators and documenters, scaffolding children’s learning and listening to them rather than instructing them. It was perceived that the principles of Reggio required an understanding of an integrated curriculum rather than one that is compartmentalised and overcrowded. “It is the antithesis of outcomes based education.” A measure of success was for there not to be “just one way” of doing things.

There was an interest in the ways in which the Reggio schools thought so carefully about the physical environment and aesthetics and the ways in which they related so closely to their communities. “The level of involvement with families is not the same as in our society.”

Overall, the presentation again challenged participants to think about the purposes of schooling and our community’s attitudes and beliefs about children and how they learn. Several groups observed that these ideas grew out of the desire to build a peaceful world.

Implications for policy and practice:

It was seen that schools need to be more prepared to listen to students rather than focusing upon telling them what they need to know. “Let us involve students in their learning decisions, listen to them and collaborate. Value difference in them; don’t expect all to be able to do the same thing at the same time.” This means that teachers have to be very skilled at “really understanding how their students learn”.

A shift to a more problem-based approach to learning is possible if schools have the will. However, it was seen by several groups that “the structures in secondary schools do not easily allow implementation of aspects (of Reggio ideas)”. “It would be good for secondary teachers to visit primary classrooms.” The constraints of the current organisation of the curriculum into key learning areas would have to be addressed. This has important implications for the management of secondary schools “How do we do this and maintain specialities? Navigating VCE/HSC is almost impossible.” One group argued that the ideas presented by Professor Fleet could have great significance in the middle years of schooling.

Some concern was expressed regarding the measure of success. “You would need to measure in terms of the experiences of the middle ‘chunk’, not the top or bottom.” There is a temptation to simplify complex ideas and try to put them into practice – schools will need to fully understand what is proposed and how the philosophy has been developed.

Finally some groups observed that the importance of space, its organisation and arrangement, requires more attention than we normally give to it.

Key words and phrases:

Five groups nominated “Valuing the unexpected”. Four focused on “Provocation” and “Aesthetics”. Three groups were concerned with “Looking beyond what you see at first”, and “Collaboration”. Two groups mentioned: “Seeking complexity”, “Listening” and “Peace”. Each of the following was mentioned once by a group: “Potential”, “Documentation”, “Learning”, “Negotiation”, “Experimental”, “Immersion”, “Community”, “Shadows”, “Children first”, “Potential” and “Not all the same at the same time”.

PLENARY PAPER - Giving Girls Voice

Dr Kris Needham presented the third plenary paper of the conference. As a school Principal she has a concern for continuously improving the ways in which her comprehensive girls’ high school, Asquith Girls High School, contributes to the learning of its students and the professional learning of its teachers. She also has a focus upon the school developing learning in partnership with the community in a context where parents and citizens are kept fully advised of the work of the school, its purposes and directions.

Dr Needham’s paper discussed a model of research-based consultation that employed students as researchers, not only contributing to the gathering of evidence, but also in

analysing and synthesising the outcomes of the enquiry. Before proceeding to the details of the study Dr Needham set down some general observations about the viability, ethics and usefulness of work of this kind. Having students engaged in research both gives them a voice and also honours learning as the shared core business of the school. As the key consequential stakeholders, students have a right to make a contribution to the evaluation of the school’s policies and practices. Dr Needham referred to the studies of Professor Jean Rudduck and Dr Michael Fielding in the UK where a great deal of this work has been undertaken.²

² This work can be accessed at www.consultingpupils.co.uk/

In sum the purposes of “giving students voice” are seen to:

- Serve the needs of the learning in the school by enhancing students’ awareness of themselves as learners and teachers’ capacities to learn through action, reflection and enquiry;
- Assist the school’s leadership in making key decisions on the basis of evidence; and
- Develop the capacity in the school to undertake systematic enquiry in the context of the knowledge society.

Dr Needham indicated that Asquith Girls High School is a member of the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools, hosted by the Centre for Practitioner Research at the Faculty of Education, University of Sydney. The Coalition has provided mutual support to member schools in undertaking school-based research and building a culture of evidence-based practice.

Turning to the studies themselves Dr Needham cited several initiatives. In the first case students were trained to manage focus group discussion with their peers. Year 9 students, in groups of three, undertook to interview younger students in Years 7 and 8 about their learning and the conditions that they believed best supported their learning. All of the students who were trained were volunteers and not necessarily those holding particular leadership positions in the school. They not only undertook the interviewing and recording of results but also participated in discussions regarding what the results might mean to the school and its practices. Subsequently, the students reported the results to the staff and the community.

The results flowing from the student data were lengthy and complex. The major features were:

- Peer learning and its importance for a supportive learning environment;
- Learning should be enjoyable;
- Interactive learning where students feel confidence to speak up and ask questions is essential; and
- Learning, which is seen by students as relevant and related to their cultural lives is also of great importance to them.

The second project that was reported by Dr Needham was “Voices for a supportive learning environment: The self-image study”. A similar focus group methodology was used and the data was collected not only from students, but also from teachers and parents as well.

Self image was identified through staff concerns and discussion at a community planning forum, as a focus area for the school’s 2003 management plan. To begin, it was decided to gather student views on self-image to help define the meaning of the term in the context of teaching at learning. A group of Year 9 students was invited to participate as focus group leaders and was trained by staff, thus further building capacity among the student body.

Another community forum early in 2003 provided an opportunity to raise awareness of the issue and collect ideas and understandings from 60 staff, students and parents present. Student inquirers, working in pairs, conducted focus groups of

mixed representatives. The students in consultation with the teachers who trained them devised the questions:

- What is self image?
- What are signs that students have a positive self image?
- What are signs that students have a negative self image?
- What influences affect self image?
(School/community/home)
- What are some things that this school does to help students develop a positive self image?
(Teachers/friends/peers/programs/in the classroom/what students learn)
- What can this school do to improve student self image?

Discussion arising from these stimulus questions was recorded for later analysis.

Another study that the school is undertaking with other members of the Coalition and the Australian Museum is investigating what helps and hinders learning when visiting the museum. This study uses photographs as a major stimulus for discussion. It is currently underway, and when completed those students who have participated will assist others in the school to employ the same methodology to investigate the provision of a supportive learning environment in the school in relation to the development of a positive self-image among students.

Several of the students who had taken part in the first study were present at the Conference and were available for questions. They indicated that the experience had certainly enhanced their confidence in being able to identify and speak about learning conditions in their school and to indeed “have a voice”.

In her conclusion Dr Needham pointed to the resource *Learning to Listen: Listening to Learn* (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2003) and indicated its helpfulness in supporting school-based enquiry.

COMMENTARY:

When student voice is taken seriously in schools it has serious consequences. It can be unsettling when negative concerns are expressed about teaching and learning. As well, the students themselves are vulnerable. They have relatively little power and need to be able to trust the staff. It is important that the students are advised regarding the ethics of research and need to avoid citing individuals, but rather focus on behaviours.

In work of this kind the students appreciate the opportunity to provide honest and open feedback.

PROVOCATION:

Scardamalia & Bereiter (1999) have suggested that it is important to re-think students’ place in the school as members of the school community rather than as clients or customers. What changes would need to be made for the school culture to be more inclusive of students in the decision-making processes?



PLENARY PAPER - The Alto Line

The final plenary paper of the conference was given by Mr Bill Toppin, Headmaster of The Hutchins School, Hobart, Tasmania. He indicated that as a result of taking part in the national Innovation and Best Practice Project where he examined some of the outcomes of the establishment of a Middle School he was convinced to explore further and more deeply. He was interested in examining what students had to say about the middle years in the context of a comparative study. He wanted to know how the Hutchins School compared and contrasted with other school environments.

Consequently he developed a study that involved some 7000 students and 65 non-government schools in Canada, USA and Australia. Stage 1 was completed last year; Stage 2 is to be completed in 2005. The study's name, The Alto Line derives from a musician's term that signals the change in voice coming into puberty. In other words, Mr Toppin was particularly interested in adolescence and gender.

The purpose of the study, then, was to contribute to an understanding of the role of gender in education through exploring the attitudes of students of junior high school age who attend single sex and coeducational schools. The research focused upon four questions:

- What measurable differences and similarities are present in the attitudes of boys and girls?
- Are attitudes of students different depending upon whether they attend a single sex or coeducational school?
- What differences in attitudes are there between the nations?
- Can differences in attitudes of students at different schools be revealed?

The data was generally gathered by means of a self-reporting questionnaire, nine focus groups and one case study. It was seen by Mr Toppin as a qualitative study.

In brief the results revealed:

- Students have a positive attitude towards their schooling and themselves.
- Traditional attitudes regarding masculinity and femininity prevail.
- There are very strong trends associated with the type of school attended regarding the attitudes of girls and boys.
- Males in single sex schools compared with males in co-educational schools have a much more positive attitude about themselves in key educational areas.
- More students are bullied often and more students bully others in male single sex schools than co-educational schools.

- Individual school cultures override generalisations about attitudes held by boys and girls.

In his presentation Mr Toppin suggested that the main finding was the last of these; that the enduring school culture was a highly significant feature in the socialisation of young people and their subsequent achievement.

COMMENTARY:

Gender issues in relation to schooling have captured the educational imagination over the last two decades. Studies do not always agree. For example, Brutsaert & Van Houtte (2002) found that: "Girls, *ceteris paribus*, do feel better integrated into single sex than mixed sex schools." (p.54) They reflected that the school is socially of greater consequence for girls than for boys in that for single sex school girls there are substantially lower levels of stress than for their co-educational counterparts.

Mr Toppin's paper was an example of ways in which schools can systematically gather evidence about their policies and practices. In this case there was a desire to make comparisons, but given that individual school culture is a very important variable, it is also legitimate for the school to look internally as to how students perceive their experiences in relation to these large questions about personal emotions, bullying and achievement.

PROVOCATION:

In girls' schools bullying is often not seen or treated as an important issue. If a school were to investigate bullying it would be important to do some preliminary work first in the same way that Dr Needham did in relation to self image. This task would be to find the ways in which students are defining bullying and then expand it beyond the physical. How is bullying manifested in girls' schools and does it only apply to the students?

KEYNOTE ADDRESS - Implications for Girls' Learning of Brain Research

The second keynote address of the Conference was given by Dr JoAnn Deak, a well respected, international speaker on issues of brain development, gender equity and the consequences for the development of optimal learning environments. Dr Deak's experience embraces both education and psychology; she has also engaged in sustained scholarship investigating, analysing and evaluating studies of the human brain and the implications for learning. Her most recent publication *Girls will be Girls – Raising Confident and Courageous Daughters* (Deak, 2003) was available at the Conference.

In her presentation Dr Deak drew upon the latest brain research in relation to girls to illuminate ways in which parents and teachers can help them to learn and thrive. She indicated that the field of brain research is a burgeoning one and that much of the earlier science drew upon "dead brains" or dysfunctional brains. Today's technology, using MRIs, allows a more detailed examination of the brain as it processes information in real time.

Dr Deak argued that while some human traits are "gender equal" others vary according to the predetermined patterns of development in the womb: "Neurological development in utero is as different from the neck up as from the neck down." In her presentation she discussed the effects of the hormones oestrogen and testosterone on brain development. She indicated what she had to say would apply generally to 80% of females (and conversely 80% of males) but that it should be borne in mind that between the two there are about 20% of males and females who do not conform to the brain patterns that she was about to describe. She emphasised that men and women can achieve equally but that they take different routes to reach their goals.

A major part of Dr Deak's argument lay in her concern that schools provide diverse experiences that assist in the growth of those things with which girls have the greatest difficulty. So that while girls are generally more able to undertake tasks requiring fine motor skills, detailed sequential thinking, language and auditory skills; they should be challenged by tasks that make demands upon their gross motor, spatial, visual and integrating competencies. "In early childhood, primary and middle school we should make sure that students do things they are not good at!"

Dr Deak predicated her case upon the ways in which the brain is designed to create pathways; that the dendrites require stimulation to become "bushier". She argued that in early childhood boys need to be put in the language corner and young girls in the blocks corner "so they can develop dendrites for each others' areas". A strong case was made for ensuring that when we come to assessing learning we do so in recognition of the learners' strengths and orientations if we are to maximise performance.

Moving from the cognitive to the emotional Dr Deak discussed the place of the mid-brain amygdala, the feeling part of the brain. It is claimed the amygdala is more developed among females, so that emotions operate with greater intensity in girls. She explained that at various developmental stages for girls the amygdala has the ascendancy and that account needs to be taken of this, not only in terms of developing appropriate pedagogies, but also in relation to ways in which teachers and counsellors might reason with a student. During adolescence fear and anxiety can be highly significant for girls. Positive emotions such as joy and happiness tend to be gender fair. Dr Deak illustrated her argument regarding differences by recounting a school reunion. While she believed that a teacher had been unfair and harping in her relations with one of the boys in the class, when she discussed it with him, all those years later, he had no recollection of the behaviour.

In sum Dr Deak emphasised that teachers of girls need to understand their charges and connect to them and their development. She argued that negative emotion is not subject to reasoning, but better overcome by being engaged in active living.

COMMENTARY:

The area of brain research is complex and at times contradictory. It was suggested in the presentation that Alzheimer's disease is five times more prevalent among women because of the depletion of oestrogen that can be addressed by the use of hormone replacement therapy. However, some recent research on HRT suggests that this is not the case and that such therapy does not have a great impact on brain activity. It will be some time before the last word is written on the function of the human brain.

PROVOCATION:

Even allowing for the ongoing controversy and nature of brain research it is clear that there are gender differences and that, as educators, we need to take account of these. As well, we need to remember the 20% of students who fall outside the norm. How do we know who those 20% are and do we differentiate learning sufficiently to accommodate them as well?



JOB ALIKE - Session 2

Following the second suite of plenary presentations and the second keynote address a brief second job-alike session was conducted. In spite of there being less time available than originally planned, it was clear that groups very quickly engaged with the task and covered most of the required ground. It must be acknowledged, however, that the responses were less complete than for the first such session.

DR KRIS NEEDHAM:

Ideas that resonate for us:

A number of participants were impressed by the quality of the work that the students had undertaken. They believed that the methodology of attending to student voice indicated a respect for the girls and a recognition that they are fully participating members of the school community: "They moved from being clients, to being members (of the community)." Consulting students was seen to be a process that would authentically inform the school and lead to improvements in policies and practices. "It is clear that they were taking the staff on a journey."

It was seen that additional benefits accrued from the processes in that not only was the school well informed of students' perspectives, but that leadership skills were also being developed and nurtured. As well, those students who trained to run the focus groups were able to engage in genuine reflection; as were (to a lesser degree) the younger students who participated in the focus groups.

It was seen as impressive that the school managed what was at times negative data with sensitivity and care. It was suggested that the leadership of the school had led to the staff being resilient and able to deal with the feedback. It was also seen as essential that the data be followed up as expectations would be raised by the processes that had been adopted.

Several responses indicated an interest in the over-arching notion of the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools and the enquiry methodologies being developed, such as "the silent conversation". It was believed that the Coalition provided schools with a structure within which to conduct local small-scale inquiries.

Implications for policy and practice:

A number of responses indicated an interest in using similar techniques, but recognised that some specialist training and development would be required at the local level. One group suggested that the first place for developing the skills among the students might be through the SRC.

Again, it was understood that where schools adopted a stance that accommodated to student voice it was essential that action follows: "Students would need to see that they had assisted in making a difference." Also staff would need to be prepared appropriately: "We would need to be careful not to shoot the messenger."

In one group it was seen that the research training for students would also assist them in their engagement with the curriculum in that they would become more skilled at a number of communication processes.

It was thought that parents would also need to be prepared for students playing such an important role within the school's decision-making processes.

Key words and phrases:

Two groups made reference to the fact that "students are no longer clients but partners". Also two groups noted "Self image" as important. All of the following were referred to once: "Silent conversation", "Self motivated", "Perceptions of students and staff", "Action research", "Engagement", "Leadership", "Reflection and reflective learners", "Community", "Lifelong learners", "Trust and respect", "Authenticity", "Feedback", "Visible outcomes", "Genuine consultation" and "Consequences".

MR BILL TOPPIN:

Ideas that resonate for us:

Some concern was expressed regarding the research itself. It was seen in six groups that too many variables were being addressed, that the figures and results were somewhat confusing as was the notion that it was a qualitative study when little information was provided about why students might feel as they did.

The information that individual school culture is what makes the difference was noted by several groups with one adding that this had implications for marketing.

One group wondered whether the study had as much relevance for single sex girls' schools who seemed to be handling things relatively well. But another did draw attention to the bullying dimension and wondered how the data might impact upon a girls' school's bullying policies.

One group commented that they found the openness and honesty of the presentation was laudable.

Implications for policy and practice:

Several groups commented that the results were “too raw” at this point in time to know how they might influence policy. They believed that the longitudinal study might be of assistance. One group suggested that the implications for policy and practice would be more salient for schools who had taken part in the study.

However, it was thought in one group that gathering “self perception” data might be useful for the school. Another focused on the influence of school culture and thought it would be worthwhile to more closely examine how school cultures affect student self perception.

Key words and phrases:

Two groups cited “Self esteem”. “School improvement”, “Confused” and “Culture” were mentioned once.

DR JOANN DEAK:

Ideas that resonate for us:

A number of groups observed that the detailed discussion and explanations fitted with ideas that they had held intuitively but needed to be confirmed by research, “it was a validation of a ‘gut’ feeling”. The evidence was seen as powerful and compelling, challenging and provocative. “Teaching is becoming more and more of a science; we need to know more about the brain and learning.”

It was suggested that we should recognise and celebrate difference. But it was also acknowledged that we should not allow students to “become settled in their comfort zones”. Action therapy as opposed to counselling was also noted. It was seen that the “use it or lose it” philosophy was a powerful one, as was the notion of working with weaknesses as well as with strengths and slowing down “many thin layers of varnish and time to dry”. Groups recognised that some other implications were: give the brain time to do the processing; allow risk-taking in a supportive environment; the importance of the early years in learning; and stop being preoccupied with ‘rational thought’.

The propensity of girls to hold negative emotions, grudges and feelings about injustice was cited by several groups. Many felt that this information should be shared with parents who have concerns for their daughters’ wellbeing.

On the one hand, concern was expressed by several groups about the 20% of boys or girls who did not conform to the norms. On the other hand, one group wondered whether it is the 20% of women, who sit in the middle, who determine the policies for the other 80%! “Who become the lobbyists to move us beyond this?” Curriculum developers should be kept informed of this research and its implications.

Implications for policy and practice:

Given that a number of schools in the Alliance are K-12 schools, the focus on the early years was seen as particularly important. It was thought that some consideration needs to be given to the distribution of resources in the junior school.

The discussion on action therapy led some groups to consider the place of outdoor education and how it might be enhanced. Teachers need to know their students well in order to tailor their responses to the many emotional challenges that young girls deal with. The presentation reminded groups of the need to affirm girls in their learning, to encourage them and to enable them to build their self-esteem. This should be achieved, not only by drawing attention to human skills, but by teachers role modelling confident women to students.

Assessment and curriculum issues were considered by all groups. Differentiating assessment was seen as an interesting concept: “We don’t have to do it all the same way!” Some specific attention was paid to individual subjects, in particular maths. It was asked that where girls are not risk-takers in maths, when is it appropriate to intervene and move them along a little? Similarly concern was focused upon accelerating students who may be cognitively ready, but not emotionally ready to move on.

Several groups noted the commensurability between the presentation and the discussions that have been had about multiple intelligences, leading to an understanding of difference.

It was concluded by most groups that while they could not be fully engaged in brain research, they should keep a watching brief upon it and its implications for teachers and for parents.

Key words and phrases:

The science of the brain was clearly fascinating. Six groups made reference to “Bushing up the Dendrites”. Four noted the role of the “Amygdala”. The fact that the “brain needs time” was noted by three.

In terms of emotions it was noted by several groups that “Engaging with the emotions” and “Avoiding high negatives” were important, as was “Connectedness and learning”.

“Action therapy” and “Different pathways” were also noted.

Dr Deak’s humour was applauded: “Isn’t that a kick!”

The last words go to one group: “Competent, confident, connected – how girls thrive!”



CONCLUSION

In the final page of the “job-alike” booklet participants had an opportunity to comment on the conference as a whole. Not everyone had the time to complete this section, but there was a strong sense that the combination of research and scholarship was truly appreciated as was the contrast between “big picture” and local studies and their implications for practice. Participants were challenged to find ways of reconciling some of the different inputs and to make sense of them. Indeed, the balance between the theoretical and practical seemed about right for most. It was seen that “there was lots of scope, variety and rich ideas to take away, evidence-based and practical at the same time”.

While it was regretted that there was not as much time as some would have liked for the “job-alike” sessions the flexibility of the organisers was applauded.

Something that resonated for all was the excellent hospitality and the wonderful ambience of Loreto Kirribilli.

In the cover page to the “job-alike” booklet John Dewey’s thoughts on reflection were cited. It was said that:

Reflective thinking begins with a state of doubt, hesitation or perplexity that then moves through the act of searching to find the means for resolving the doubt. It (reflection) is the active persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends. (1933, p.9)

From all of the evidence available to us, the conversations that were had, the notes that were taken, the questions that were asked, it can be said that ‘Knowing Women: Growing Girls’ was a truly educative conference.

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