

## Teachers Networking to Develop Middle Schooling

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*It used to be said that teaching was the second most private activity that one can engage in. Years ago when I began teaching, I never entered another classroom in the school that I was teaching, let alone having the idea of what was happening or going on in that classroom or even knowing very well other teachers in the other eight year level classes. It was a large school. I did not know anyone from another school in the area. A collection of teachers from a range of schools to learn about teaching and learning just did not happen. When I moved to secondary teaching it was not very much different at the very beginning. Although by then I had opportunities to attend professional development seminars, workshops, in-service type things. But I still did not know what or how my colleagues were teaching. My opportunities to have my ideas expanded were not there.*

Today teaching is not a lonely activity. We have teachers team teaching; sometimes team teaching in the same classroom for whole or part of the day. We have teachers planning units together to hear about what others are doing. We also have inter-systemic networking. We have examples where we have systems working together – in Salisbury there are three schools (Catholic school, state school and independent secondary college) that have been working together, in a discovering democracy project over the last 12 months.

These sorts of approaches are very much the culture of middle schooling.

Professional development is now experienced in many forms and networking is one of its most powerful tools, it has given us an opportunity to share ideas and practices and support each other – it enables teachers to gain access to people and ideas, to have conversations about resources, projects, what people are doing and opportunities that they would not have had access to by attending activities such as seminars and conferences.

I would now like to talk about the opportunities available to teachers for networking.

People from schools will possibly be aware of this but I will let you know what is available in other systems as well. We have in-trust school networking where we have people working together, we have glass walls so that we can see what is going on in their classrooms getting ideas and working together. What is happening in the inter-school systems is that the networks are organized on a local basis, according to local clusters and are school directed or where 'like schools' e.g. the Anglican Schools, will cluster together.

Brisbane Catholic Education has local networks established in the Gold Coast, Caboolture/Petrie area, Sunshine Coast, Maryborough/Harvey Bay, the south East which meets around Cannon Hill and also the inner North-West which meets around the Enoggera area. Others will be established in the future. Those networks for Brisbane Catholic Education are very much again the local model where staff can address transition issues, compare what

students are doing, curriculum, student learning and the promotion of continuity for students and their learning experiences. Activities are conducted such as guest speakers, primary and secondary teachers swapping for a day, and collaborative planning with primary and secondary together. With networking, one of the most difficult things to do is to sustain it, we will come together as local groups and talk and meet and we will to it once or twice and it dwindles off. Teachers are very busy people and so maintaining networks requires coordination, management and leadership. Networks need a very defined and shared purpose: why are we here?

We are here for social gathering, professional support and what is going to be our support, our focus for the term/semester/year. Effective networks also need to recognize the needs and attributes of the participants in the network, we all have so much to share. They encourage the sharing of expertise within the network, for example, having a guest speaker and sharing experiences with them. That requires fostering a climate of communication and collegiality. We also believe that it is important to provide a critical reflection of practice and how we do that. Sometimes because of time constraints this gets put aside.

We began in 1999 as a result of a National Project: *Shaping Middle Schooling Australia* that was the national report from the research that was conducted prior to that. An aspect of the national project that took place between 1996 and 1998 was the state forums. The forum held in Queensland in 1997 resulted in a group task force that continued to meet until in 1999 and then became a formal association, a real structure of support to help teachers. As we began here in Brisbane in 1999 it is Brisbane-based even though it is a National Association. We have members from all States and Territories and countries throughout the World including the United States, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand. We have had two conferences and we are having another one next year from the 8-10 May 2003.

We have professional development once a term, for example, facilitated workshops. Such workshops allow input and the sharing of experiences. People in various areas have established branches and have different models for their networking.

I believe one of the most powerful agents of change is experiencing the reality of 'what can be'. When we started the middle schooling project with Catholic Education we had some of the top people in the state working on this. Part of this project involved many teachers from all systems meeting to discuss how they engage with adolescents in their care which resulted, in 1998, in visits to classrooms. We are now feeling quite open and comfortable about people coming in to see what is happening. And I believe (as far as networking is concerned) that this is one of the most valuable modes available to us: it is the reality of networking.

We have had primary teachers going to secondary schools and secondary teachers going to primary schools now we have broken down barriers of 'This is just a primary school thing' so that what I can see and use from one end to the other in the school system. Networks in Middle Years Schooling actually provide a vehicle for breaking down the primary and secondary divide and looking at students that are from 10-11 years of age through to 14-15 years of age and looking at their needs and how they can meet those in developmental ways through those years. Another point I would like to add to the glass door classroom is the discipline-related issue. All children in the classroom can be seen and quite often teachers just walking past may

see student activity that the classroom teacher might not see. You can see what others are doing; it facilitates the love of learning for our young adolescents where they can have fun, experience success, provide productive relationships and act independently, cooperatively and responsibly and we can help each other do this.

It does require a lot of trust and mutual respect and if that is going to support real conversations, then this is something we have to build. We have a common language now and a common research based rationale for what we are doing.

### **Biographical Details**

Susan Hearfield is the newly appointed National Executive Officer for MYCER Inc (Middle Years of Schooling Association) based at Indooroopilly State High School with the MISR office. Prior to taking up this new appointment, Susan was working for Catholic education as an education officer in middle schooling and can be credited for leading much of the innovation in middle schooling in the catholic system and beyond. Susan has played a very active role in organizing and convening national conferences in relation to middle years.