

ANTHONY EDWARDS

13. SOME REFLECTIONS

I don't intend to draw the strands of the research together in this book to any great extent unless it adds to my own narrative. The authors have done this very ably in both Chapter 1 and Chapter 12. However it is worth commenting on the elements that make up the two books in this series (of which this is the second) and ask whether they can stand on their own or if they are inseparable. Book One is split into four sections which each in their turn set the parameters for the research into the Bendigo Education Plan (BEP), examine the role of leaders and teachers in this context, explore the effects on learners and identify and comment upon any emergent new practices and knowledge. Book Two is divided into two sections, the first of which focuses on a number of broad themes including quality learning, teacher adaptation, student agency, adolescent wellbeing, and digital technologies in open-plan settings. The second section focuses on some of the changes in approach that have occurred in learning and teaching in English, humanities, mathematics and science, problem solving and ends with some conclusions about remodelling schooling resulting from the implementation of the BEP. The trajectory of the research is clear. Whilst the first book generally examines some of the broad themes associated with the Plan the second inclines naturally towards a more visceral investigation into the impact on the day-to-day issues that affect the functioning of any educational institution, regardless of its formation. Once the team had undertaken the first broad theoretical sweep it was inevitable that they would want to look deeper into practice and the two books represent this journey very clearly. Despite the connection between them there is no doubt in my mind that both are independently viable. In addition the transition from a macro to micro focus adds to, rather than detracts from, the value of each as a separate resource. It's very tempting to suggest that this trajectory should be continued as part of the route map for future research. It would indeed be useful to investigate a host of questions associated with initiatives like the BEP such as how do open-plan environments:

- Effect the management of specialist resources.
- Diffuse the boundaries between subjects.
- Lend themselves more readily to learning and teaching in certain subjects.
- Necessitate a redefinition of the curriculum.
- Are heavily reliant on the use of new technologies in order to function effectively.

However, simply continuing to examine practice, laudable as it might be, could help to reinforce the false notion that the changes result entirely from some form of architectural determinism, unless it is tempered by looking outwards as well as inwards. It is essential to bear in mind that, no matter how important at the outset, the environment was only one component part of the story. There are at least three universal issues (amongst a multitude) emerging naturally from the project that are, despite their complexity, worthy of much further scrutiny. They are associated with risk taking, and community, and the nature of schools for the future.

The scale and scope of the original Bendigo initiative was so radical that it could not be conceived or implemented without recognising that a certain amount of risk was involved. The risks, which could result in some form of loss or other, were distributed across the entire spectrum of stakeholders. Politicians, policy makers, and parents all had something to lose but it was students and their teachers who shouldered the burden of coping with much of the uncertainty involved in the Plan. Students were immediately exposed to new ways of working and relating to each other, and their teachers to new pedagogies. The story of how the resulting opportunities and threats were coped with has been admirably told in the two books. However, there is a strong case for re-examining what has and is happening using the concept of risk taking as a single focal point. Although risk taking may be associated with uncertain outcomes, it is an essential human behaviour that allows us to adapt and change readily (Trimpop, 1994). As such it is an integral feature of any educational change, no matter how great or small. It is important here to make a distinction between risk and risk taking. The former could result from the vagaries of fortune whilst the latter, with which I suggest the research team should mainly be concerned, involves making deliberate choices.

For the students, risk taking, particularly in relationship to adolescence, can have negative connotations. It sometimes is linked directly to delinquent behaviour (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, & Shochet, 2014). Nevertheless there may be very strong connections between the willingness to take risks and creativity in its broadest sense that are worth cultivating. The National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE, 1999) in the United Kingdom and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) suggest that there might indeed be a connection between risk taking and creativity. Nickerson (2008) is more forceful stating that risk taking is central to creative activity. This connection may be more evident or more readily fostered in open-plan settings. There may also be gender differences in risk-taking behaviour, clearly exposed in this context, that are worthy of further investigation. Work done by Booth, Cardona-Sosa, and Nolen (2014) with first year university students, has already found that there is a link but it would be useful to test this notion in what are quite a unique set of circumstances.

For the educator there are very specific challenges in relationship to risk-taking. On one hand they are encouraged to be flexible, dynamic, and willing to take risks and yet on the other are "...continually monitored, managed and held individually accountable for every hour of the day". (MacLaren, 2012, p. 161). There is also a

further pressure resulting from the teacher's perceived role as a moderator who seeks to reduce risk behaviours amongst those in their care (Chapman et al., 2014) The authors also make the point in their concluding remarks at the end of the book that as a result of exposing teachers to the inevitable risk taking as a result of the BEP tested, amongst other things, their capacity to adapt. It would be useful to explore whether there is a strong correlation between the willingness to take risks and the ability to adapt amongst teachers. To a certain extent some of these tensions have already been explored as underlying themes in a number of chapters, particularly those relating to changes in practice.

Le Fevre (2014) suggests that the costs of risk-taking are not neutral, but lead to positive or negative outcomes. This initiative is rich with opportunities to examine the decision-making process leading to risks being taken. It would be extremely useful to investigate how various stakeholders, particularly politicians and policy makers, view the balance between threats and opportunities. This is important. Ellison (2009, p. 46) contends that it is imperative, given global economic trends "... that policy makers and educators need to find a way to institutionalize experimentation, specialization, and innovation into public schooling". Institutionalised experimentation and innovation are synonymous with risk-taking.

Community is the second overarching theme, which could extend the research activity of the team. Once again this permeates almost every chapter but it is worth highlighting one of the findings from Chapter 4 on whole-school approaches to adolescent wellbeing. The authors of this chapter conclude with the notion that there is a direct link between the

... quality of the connections among the multiple groups that contribute to a school community such as students, teachers, families, professionals from community agencies, and other involved local groups and individuals, reflect the degree of social capital in the school environment.

Both the nature and quality of this connectedness are rich with research opportunities but there are three specific aspects of this I would wish to explore further.

For students and their teachers the changes have meant that the way they relate to each other and their practices have been altered. Working effectively in teams and tailoring the learning specifically to the needs of the individual now appear to be paramount in this environment. Does the reshaping of the learning space that has resulted from the Bendigo initiative affect the relationship between the school and the agencies, communities and group. In other words do the effects of the 'experiment' stop at the gates of the school? How has the indigenous community been affected by and been able to affect these changes is of particular importance. Nichol (2011) contends

... that the provision of the most appropriate education for indigenous students is extraordinarily complex and presents an enormous challenge to educators
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Additionally it is worth asking if this is a blueprint for helping to reimagine the notion of community for all schools of the future or just a local solution to a local problem.

In considering the way in which opening up the learning spaces by the schools involved in the Plan has affected the broader community it hard to ignore the role of new technologies in also reducing some of the constraining effects of bricks and mortar. In a sense the use of social media and search engines in education has already done much to bring the ‘outside world’ more readily into the classroom, but it is worth asking if, when combined with the changes resulting from BEP, the formation and reformation of learning communities is more powerful because of the very nature of the Plan itself.

My last grand theme concerns the shape of the environment itself. This Plan is now very well established, with a large number of students who have either been, or are currently involved in, learning in this context. They represent a well-informed community whose insights and understanding are invaluable. It is essential to ask them about how they would shape the future of schools bearing in mind their experiences. Noriega, Heppell, Bonet, and Heppell (2013, p. 144) urge us to trust this generation of learners because they have:

... much more information to use and because they are using their tools to develop or nuance their new worlds. Most likely, they are not going to create the elitist places previously imagined, nor fulfill established design criteria. Does this matter? Probably not, the relevant issue is the best possible learning, and typically this embraces collegiality, reflective practice, meta-cognition, and offers no modal switch between playful and serious learning and work.

The authors themselves have specifically identified a number of areas that they consider worthy of further investigation and it is important to highlight them here. As a result of their work on teacher adaptation in open-plan settings (Chapter 2) they concluded that there is a constraining action of institutional routine on teacher agency and whilst wishing to counteract the tendency to regard this as overly pessimistic viewpoints suggest:

... that a space does exist for thinking and acting differently, and that this is generated from the expressions and authorisations of the up-scaled open-plan environment.

They contend that there are opportunities to examine more closely the factors that effect the permanence of any change. This potentially has a much wider application than in projects similar to the BEP and it should be undertaken with that in mind. In Chapter 3, which explores the use of gaming to afford teacher and student agency the authors have identified a central tension – how does a learner move from dependence to independence (or co-dependence) as a worthy extension to their research. They suggest that the balance between student’s self-management of their own emerging agency and the co-regulation by educators should be further investigated. This is

a very broad field and it is good to note that their interest lies in investigating this balance as the complexity of learning tasks and possibly the unpredictable nature of learning activities increases. It is particularly relevant because one of the emergent themes from the whole of the work they have done on the BEP is that teachers seek manageable order to the curriculum in terms of their own and their students' roles and students likewise appear to desire certainty and security.

Finally there is one central question that many in the world of education and beyond, wish to be answered – was it all worth it? The chance to undertake longitudinal studies provides very real opportunities to seek a meaningful answer to this question.

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