

# CHANGE IS A JOURNEY TAKEN ONE STEP AT A TIME

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## ABSTRACT

Emerging from the Western Australian School Effectiveness Study (WASES), is a story of a high school in a small rural town undergoing changes and improvements. Some change came from within – some change came from forces outside of the school's control. Of great interest here, is a narrative about how the people working in and attending this school absorbed the changes around them and became different people. This story is about the first steps in a journey of change.

### *Educational Change*

Change is a journey of unknown destination, where problems are our friends, where seeking assistance is a sign of strength, where simultaneous top-down bottom-up initiatives merge, where collegiality and individualism co-exist in productive tension.

(Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991)

Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves contend that change is 'ubiquitous and relentless, forcing itself on us at every turn....the secret of growth and development is learning how to contend with the forces of change' (Fullan, 1993, p. vii).

But who is to be changed and why? Fullan identifies the teachers' capacities to deal with change, to become change agents, rather than victims of change, as the most critical requirement of our schools (ibid, p. ix). He further identifies 'the educational system as a learning organization – expert at dealing with change as a normal part of its work, not just in relation to the latest policy, but as a way of life' (ibid, p. 4).

This paper draws on the thesis presented by Fullan that a school must become a learning organization, expert in the dynamics of change, with administrators and teachers becoming skilled 'Change Agents' with moral purpose (ibid, p. 5).

Productive educational change, at its core, is not the capacity to implement the latest policy, but rather the ability to survive the vicissitudes of planned and unplanned change while growing and developing.

(Fullan, 1993, p.5)

This paper presents a narrative of change, at its beginning, and change which is ongoing. The author is apologetic and sympathetic to the people who have changed and are changing in this school.

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The Western Australian School Effectiveness Study is largely a quantitative, longitudinal study of 28 rural high schools. The Western Australian School Effectiveness Study [WASES], consists of three phases.

In the *First Phase*, survey instruments were developed and piloted in two schools (1995). In the *Second Phase*, a longitudinal survey was conducted in 28 Western Australian high schools over a three year period. The purpose of this survey was to evaluate the school and classroom climate and characteristics of effective schools in differential contexts. Because the growth model is particularly useful for measuring change over time in student outcomes, while controlling for other influencing variables which may also change over time, the same students at the same schools were surveyed over a period of three years (1996 to 1998). This phase was funded in part by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the Department of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) in the form of a large grant and research fellowship. Finally, in the *Third Phase*, a case study approach will be used to examine some exceptionally effective and ineffective schools in the rural and urban locations of Western Australia (1998 to 1999).

While students, teachers and parents in these 28 schools were surveyed and students tested, a series of visits and interviews to one school revealed another dimension to this study. Over a period of time, we talked to teachers and principals/deputy principals and asked questions about the way each school was run. This phase of the study is continuing, however this paper attempts to compare the school before and after changes were implemented.

The school described in this paper will be called Butterworth\* Senior High School for the purpose of protecting the participants in the research. However, it is recognised that these are changes which affect everyone in the school and we respect the privacy and concerns which belong to those who were kind enough to contribute to this study, both by way of allowing us to interview them at a stressful time and by telling us how they were affected by change.

#### *Butterworth Senior High School*

Butterworth Senior High School is a traditional school, with a long history in our state, Western Australia. The school has 850 students in Years 8 to 12, with 250 of these bussing in from rural towns and farms around Smalltown. One third of these students seek financial assistance, however most students are plainly middle class. The students who bus in, come great distances and may take more than an hour to get to school each morning. While the Aboriginal population in Smalltown is rather high, few Aboriginal students attend Butterworth. Most attend Nottage Senior High School, which has an Aboriginal education officer working there.

A screening system is used for the annual intake of Year 8 students, resulting in the identification of 22 students who were inadequately schooled in 1997 – that is, these students were deficient in their English literacy.

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\* Butterworth Senior High School is an alias used to protect the people involved in this study. The names of the people used in this paper are also aliases.

This school has a pleasant, warm atmosphere. The kind of feeling which arises out of a sense of longevity and serenity. There is a sense of tradition with the school. Many photos dating back 75 years ago line the walls. Along with the tradition, there are many teachers at this school who have been with the school for over 20 years. They do not intend moving from the school and enjoy the security of belonging to a place and sense of pride in their contribution to this school. Teacher turnover is low at this school.

#### *The Past Principal*

The Principal at this school, Jonathan, was retiring in 1997. He frequently attended meetings and out of school events. However, the day to day operations at Butterworth were left to the two deputy principals, who often took turns alternating as acting Principal throughout the year. These two deputy principals became Acting Principal in a team manner in semester 2, 1997, and a new principal commenced her term at this school in 1998.

Jonathan's management style was one of complete and total trust in his deputy principals. This was of course also a relaxed leadership style, however the deputy principals at Butterworth enjoyed a great deal of freedom and autonomy. This style had the advantage of developing leadership skills in the two deputies. Further, they worked equally in a team spirit. Far from being disadvantaged, Butterworth enjoyed a successful organizational management. There was however the problem that these deputies worked extremely hard to fill the leadership role.

#### *Deputy Principals*

People were free to come and go out of Peter's office and he rarely shut his door. Peter found himself working extremely hard, rather than delegating work to others who were already overworked, so he often did the jobs himself. He had an open door policy, which was simultaneously inviting and frustrating. Peter found himself catching up after school, due to the constant interruptions throughout the school day. It was clear that Peter loved his job. He enjoyed the constant throb of life in Butterworth and did not want to lose touch with his school. Peter looked after the senior students (Years 11 and 12) and prepared the timetables for them. His job is difficult, yet challenging.

Sarah deals with lower school students (Years 8, 9 and 10) and prepares their timetables. Sarah and Peter have a great deal of experience running the school and believe they are doing an excellent job. To a large extent, the previous Principal, Jonathan, allowed these two people to run things unchecked and with little or no monitoring. They are extremely competent and not used to having their decisions questioned. Sarah and Peter are particularly adept at making decisions about the day to day operations of this school. Jonathan had great faith in their ability and competence. He did not see it as his role to intervene or question them. Sarah and Peter were the fulcrum of Butterworth. Without their constant knowledge and consistency, the school would have no foundation.

#### *Problems and Foundations*

While the foundations of this school were unchanging and rock solid, there was a distinct sense that this school had no specific goals or direction. The warmth and collegiality was a strong feature, yet the management style tended to be that of a benevolent dictator. There was no openness in the way finances were distributed. Rather, those staff members who had the courage

and incentive to request additional funding were often rewarded directly by the principal. Jonathan knew a good idea when he saw it and, though he held onto the purse strings tightly, he was also quick to issue funds for those who were creative enough to come up with a good idea. There was no strategic planning for this. Those who were more vocal, had a greater opportunity to receive financial incentives.

While the school lacked direction and planning, it did make up for this by way of flexibility in its allocation of resources. So how did this management style affect the teaching staff? Well, most staff felt isolated, drifting and uninspired. This led to a cottonwool type of work environment. The teaching staff adapted to this type of leadership. They did their job, and got on with their teaching. However, there was a great deal of resentment. The source of this resentment was in the way financial resources were allocated. While Head of Departments had a reasonable budget with which to run their subject areas, there was a perception that the non-academic staff (such as drama, performing arts, physical education) had a greater share of additional funding. This was due to the way the previous principal, Jonathan, allocated extra funds to these areas. The academic departments felt disadvantaged and grew resentful. There was a significant amount of tension between academic and non-academic staff due to this financial injustice. This school needed change, but there was no impetus for change to take place.

### *Change Forces: The New Principal*

This year a new Principal, Lesley, commenced her duties at Butterworth Senior High School. The agenda for change started immediately with enforcement of the existing dress codes, democratic decision-making committees, a strong work ethic and a distinctive leadership style. Changes were dramatic and immediate. Staff felt the presence of a leader with empathy, a listening ear and genuine concern to reform this school.

When teaching staff were interviewed, they consistently praised and admired their new principal. Lesley has excellent communication skills; she consults with staff and deals with issues 'fairly, honestly, tactfully'. Many teachers were somewhat overwhelmed by Lesley's incredible wealth of management skills and abilities. Having come from such a relaxed management style to a stronger leadership, the teachers are undergoing many changes. Some teachers found these changes both difficult for themselves and good for the school. One Head of Department put it this way:

I think she's had a marked effect on the school and there are several reasons for that. One is that the comparison between the old principal and the new one is probably like chalk and cheese. So the difference has been dramatic.

I mean to say it probably would have been dramatic with anyone given that the staff had input into the selection process.

I've been incredibly impressed with the manner in which the Principal has actually taken such a broad view of what actually happens in the school and the manner in which she has, in such a short period of time, been able to start addressing a lot of those issues.

Another Head of Department put it this way:

Lesley's come and we've leapt forward, which has been wonderful.

I think she's a workaholic and I think she thinks everybody else should be too. She's quite prepared to spend every evening at meetings or doing something

related to her job, and all weekend, and can't understand that other people aren't prepared to do that.

She also has some very set ideas about where she wants the school to be and without people, without those strong goals and directions then we're not going to move forward.

But I think she's having a hard job of it because she's pulling the staff. It's like a beginning teacher going into a classroom; you have to earn the kid's respect and the respect of the staff here.

Somebody new coming into the school and saying that there are a lot of things here that aren't working well, is a criticism of us and what we've been doing.

That Butterworth Senior High School has commenced a journey of substantial change is an understatement. This Principal has implemented changes by

- surveying parents and teachers
- communicating with teachers via an irregular newsletter
- review of the Management of Student Behaviour policy
- enforcement of dress code
- consistency in management style and communications
- democratic decision-making in finances, pastoral care and curriculum by way of monthly committee meetings with active roles
- regular praise and positive feedback for staff

The amount of change which occurred in the first six months was extensive, but staff have quickly adapted to the new management style and have settled into the new patterns. One staff member said:

I initially felt that she was doing too much too quickly, however now as we're getting further through the year and, most of it's underway, I don't think it is too much, although I know that there are a number of issues dropped.

I think she had an agenda of things that she was going to accomplish this year, including things like introducing student diaries, as well as improving the dress code and so on. I think some of those things have been put aside, shelved until next year.

There's a merit system that she desperately wants to introduce into the school and it's occurring in Year 9 and it's really successful.

The effect on the two deputy principals was more dramatic, for obvious reasons. These people have been compelled to work harder and become more efficient. In some ways, they are happier that they are involved in the improvement of their school. However, it was hard for these two deputies to be constantly told that the previous policies and strategies are in need of drastic changes. These deputies are stressed and undergoing change – they have had to reevaluate themselves and their roles.

Previously, the Deputy Principals knew what was expected of them and their work lives were comfortable. They had common understandings about the school and each other. The two deputies have acquired new skills and a sense of being accountable. Lesley consistently requires explanations and knowledge about her school. This has made the deputies think more about what

they are doing and their jobs entail. They have undergone changes in their roles and responsibilities, with many more meetings and communications.

The impact on them and the school is dramatic, with some pain in the process.

### *Change is a Journey, Not a Blueprint*

Michael Fullan presents a number of lessons which arise from the new paradigm of dynamic change (I have borrowed Fullan's subheading). Butterworth has started a journey and there is no returning to shore. He further describes educational change as 'likened to a planned journey into uncharted waters in a leaky boat with a mutinous crew' (Fullan, 1993, p. 24). Butterworth has a new Principal and new reforms. The boat is leaky, because of old buildings and reform coming down on them from the Education Department. The crew is difficult, because they don't know where they are going.

Fullan identifies the journey as uncertain, anxious, difficult and fearful – all of these conditions are necessary in the early stages. It is therefore an act of courage to press on with change, knowing that change will bring conflict and uncertainty.

For change to take place at Butterworth Senior High School, the new Principal had to take risks, implement strategies and deal of inevitable problems. There are no guarantees that her changes will work. Sometimes there are dynamics which make things worse rather than better. So what is important is how the people at this school deal with the changes.

### *Substantial Change Means Coping with Problems*

Teachers and leadership staff at Butterworth have undergone the beginning of a journey of change. For some, change has been uncomfortable. Reflection on these changes and the way staff think of themselves and their school is evident in most interviews conducted over many hours.

Effective organisations will embrace problems, rather than avoid them – Problems are our friends – Problems are the route to deeper change and deeper satisfaction. Successful schools probe the underlying reasons for problems and undertook substantial interventions. Successful schools did not have fewer problems, they just coped with them better.

In summary, Butterworth has commenced a journey of unknown destination. Problems have arisen along the way and this school is learning how to cope better. How each staff member does this in a communal sense will be a reflection of the leadership's coping mechanisms. In brief, if the leadership team passes on coping skills and strategies, it is likely that the journey will be successful. The success of the journey is measured by the degree to which every person at the school becomes committed to making continuous improvements. Fullan describes the heart of educational change as the teacher with the following (ibid, pp. 12-18):

- Personal Moral Purpose and Vision
- Reflective Practice and Continuous Learning
- Inquiry Skills
- Collaboration – Essential for Personal Learning

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