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# 'Send Three- and Four-pence; We're Going to a Dance': Forward Generating Research

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## Abstract

*As my playful title suggests, I am referring to the process where the statement, 'send reinforcements; we're going to advance,' is said to have become, 'send three- and four-pence; we're going to a dance'.<sup>1</sup> This quotation springs to mind when asked to think about how research gets picked up and recommendations from research are implemented in schools. This paper draws on the professional experiences of the author who has held a variety of roles in schools and the system and has also worked with a university as a system representative on a 'collaborative' research project. This paper focuses on the 'Transient Students Project'<sup>2</sup> that has recently been described in *Changing Schools* (DEST and DoD 2002). This example is described as having many of the features of 'forward-reaching research', as described in 'Backtracking practice' (Figgis et al 2000), in Chapter 3 of *The Impact of Educational Research* (DETYA 2000). At the heart of this paper is the question 'who is research for?'*

## Introduction

In 'Backtracking practice and policies to research', Figgis, Zubrick, Butorac and Alderson (2000) focus on tracking research outcomes from schools back to research. In reading this report I locate myself as a system person. I read the report as proceeding from the assumption that the most significant work being done around educational change begins with university researchers and ends with change in schools. There is no doubt that educational research does influence what happens in schools. However, I will demonstrate through my own experiences how schools and the system are ideally placed to influence what is taken up as the research agenda, and often do. Ideally, this influence should be expanded. I will focus in this paper on the South Australian Transient Students Project as an example of 'forward-generating research',<sup>3</sup> as described in 'Backtracking practice and policies to research'.

In this paper I begin by summarising 'Backtracking'. Secondly, I discuss the history of the Transient Students Project and its outcomes. I then discuss how this research

is taken up or not in universities. In conclusion I apply the ‘user-centric’ model as described in ‘Backtracking’ to the discussion of the Transient Students Project.

## Forward-travelling research

In the final section of ‘Backtracking’ the authors grapple with a conceptual model of how educational research is taken up, or not, by educational systems and schools. The user-centric model describes how, in an ideal world, research influences policy and practice, and ‘vice versa, pervasive problems can inspire researchers to initiate new studies’ (Figgis et al 2000, p. 343). The authors summarise the ‘backwards journey’ model as follows.

The journey begins with:

- The practitioners/policy makers and what drives them to seek new information; it proceeds into:
- The connecting web – which might better be described as a learning space – and through the various nodes of the web (the specific mechanisms which bring educators and research into ‘close encounters’); and finishes with:
- The research – detailing some of the messages a user-centric view delivers to researchers and funders of research. (Figgis et al 2000, p. 343).

This picture disturbs traditional views of research, that is, those developed from the perspective of the researcher. The user-centric model ‘provides a more accurate and productive description of the relationship between practitioners/policy-makers and research than the traditional schematic’ (2000, p. 343). This ‘backwards journey’ is what is later described as ‘forward-generating research’ (p. 346) undertaken by the ‘vanguard’ (p. 346) of policy makers and practitioners. Vanguard practitioners are described as ‘willing to reconstruct their knowledge because they are intellectually alert to problems and opportunities’ (p. 346). In this paper I will describe an example of ‘forward-generating research’ or a ‘backward journey’, as described above, undertaken in South Australia by ‘vanguards’.

The ‘Transient Students Project’ is of renewed interest because of a recent report *Changing Schools: Its Impact on Student Learning* (DEST and DoD 2002). In the sections that follow, I will describe, firstly, the ‘Transient Students Project’ from the perspective of a system person involved in this project; secondly, the outcomes achieved by schools and the system; and thirdly, the baton that is hopefully being passed to other researchers as a result of the publication of *Changing Schools*. In essence, the process followed is as described above. Throughout I will refer to issues raised in ‘Backtracking’.

## **The Transient Students Project in South Australia**

The Transient Students Project was established in South Australia through the work of a number of school and system-based personnel. The history of these initiatives relies on organisational memory, and I apologise in advance if the events and initiatives described here do not accurately reflect the contributions and recollections of others. I came to the Transient Students Project in May 1996 employed with the Poverty and Isolation Team within the Department of Education and Children's Services in South Australia. I replaced the previous Project Officer who had taken up a school-based position. I came to the project when a great deal of the work had been done. This work included establishing a way for remote and isolated schools to communicate with each other about the movements of students who are transient. This system, the Transient and Mobile Schools (TAMS) Network consists of two main features: electronic mail and the TAMS database that I describe below.

The issue confronting the TAMS schools in South Australia was the high incidence of student mobility both between network schools, and to other schools outside of the network. The issue that became the focus of the Transient Students Project was how to meet student learning needs – that is, when students are highly mobile, how is the teacher at the receiving school able to engage the student in learning that is both relevant and is at a level consistent with the students' abilities? The TAMS database was established to contain information about students' learning against the English as a Second Language Strands or the English Curriculum Strands<sup>4</sup> and included information about disabilities, numeracy and mathematics progress, student support programs and department support services. This two-page document is known as a 'student profile' and provides information that is important at enrolment and the first days that a student begins in a new school.

The email system allows network schools to communicate about students who have left their school and whose whereabouts are unknown to the school. Students and their families leave these locations for a range of reasons including those that I discuss below. In many instances, the family may not notify the school, and there may be a lapse of time between the student leaving one school and enrolling at another. The approach developed by the Transient Students Project was that when a student leaves a school the network is notified by email and when the student enrolls at a receiving school this school notifies the previous school. The leaving school can attach the student profile as described above, and send it electronically to the receiving school. This process enables the receiving school to engage the student in learning tasks as soon as practical after their arrival. Attendance can be followed up more promptly than has been the case in the past. For example, a student who leaves a school might stay on the school roll until their whereabouts are known. The matter of their non-attendance, after a certain period, will be reported to an attendance counsellor for follow-up. The attendance counsellor

will usually contact a range of other schools and agencies in an attempt to locate the student and their family. By including schools in this 'loop', the work of regional personnel such as attendance counsellors and others engaged in student support programs is facilitated.

Firstly, this strategy results in increasingly accurate data about student attendance and absence. Secondly, it enables schools effectively to assist the transition of students between school sites. Thirdly, students with disabilities can in some circumstances have the resources allocated to support them transferred to their new school. Fourthly, significant staff and administrative time and energy are saved as a result of these strategies, allowing these resources to be directed more effectively. Finally, and by no means least, student-learning outcomes are improved.

The assumptions behind this Transient Students Project and other initiatives is that high student mobility has adverse effects on student learning outcomes. It is also assumed that there may be social and educational costs but, to my knowledge, this assumption remains to be tested. In *Changing Schools* the survey conducted by the researchers does 'not provide conclusive evidence to support this position. Although some supportive trends are apparent, anomalies and counter-intuitive findings are also evident' (DEST and DoD 2002, p. 27). The literature review of *Changing Schools* summarises a number of studies that identify a range of problems with students who are highly mobile. Fields is cited as finding 'lower performance by mobile students in English Language Arts, peer ratings and social adjustment. He also found that mobile students could exhibit symptoms of unhappiness, depression, social withdrawal, and aggression' (Fields 1997, cited in DEST and DoD 2002, p. 7). Other researchers such as Whalen and Fried suggest that some mobile students with high intelligence were able to out-perform some students who were not mobile (1973, cited in DEST and DoD 2002, p. 8). Therefore, the links between mobility and low academic performance cannot be made conclusively. It may be that mobility along with other issues such as poverty, for example, may produce intersections of disadvantage greater than the effects of mobility alone. Indeed, this is where the Transient Students Project directed its work.

### **Identifying the issues**

In South Australia, the initiative for the Transient Students Project came from a number of remote and isolated schools concerned about students who often move between these schools. In many instances, these students might not attend school for significant periods of time. These students are described as living in poverty. Many are Aboriginal students. Much of the movement between the schools and different communities is the result of cultural and family commitments; however, students also experience a considerable number of school absences. These absences included days

missed while the family arranges for housing and reconnecting with services. The initiative for the project came from the Transient and Mobile Schools (TAMS) network who approached the Poverty and Isolation Team. They requested assistance in managing and extending the project and for the provision of resources to support the initiative. Funds from the Commonwealth under a 'Project of National Significance' grant (1994–95) enabled the project to proceed. Project management from within the Poverty and Isolation Team provided a base from which the Project Officer could work.

The above example illustrates how a school-based problem was taken up by the system and efforts were made to address the issues. It is possible that the individuals described above are vanguard educators. However, there are two issues raised in the section of 'Backtracking' that relates to this that I find a little offensive and I will discuss them here. I believe that in some educational research there is a tendency to position teachers as the problem. For example, 'Backtracking' suggests that those teachers who do reach forward to generate their own solutions to practical issues are in the minority. 'Backtracking' describes the following as 'reasons for inaction':

These people may be fully absorbed coping with other pressures. They may also believe that nothing much can be done about the problems (and that the opportunities are, consequently, not worth pursuing). We are in no position to gauge how many practitioners fall into this camp nor exactly why they resist engaging with the idea of change, but it is clear that simply intellectually recognising there is a problem or an opportunity is not enough to motivate people to seek knowledge outside the day-to-day routine of their jobs. (Figgis et al 2000, p. 345)

Remarks like this position school and system personnel as deficit and as outsiders. There is an assumption that university teachers are able to withstand the scrutiny of school and system personnel.<sup>5</sup> I will return to this point further on but, for now, this position also assumes that the priorities of the university researchers are the pre-eminent topics and school staff are misguided in not realising this. University personnel may have as part of their roles the requirement to research and publish; however, teachers and schools do not.

It is well known that we focus our attention on the issues that are important to us and to our agendas. It might be that school staff are pursuing their own research agenda and, for one reason or another, this agenda does not intersect with the interests of the researcher making these claims. Secondly, while the above quotation attempts to recognise the complexities of the day-to-day realities of life in contemporary schools, this occurs in clumsy ways. There are attempts to construct a

good–bad teacher dichotomy characterised by intellectual laziness and resistance to change. In fact, there might be immense activity, but the focus of this activity escapes the notice of the researcher. The evidence provided in this paper about the Transient Students Project and the ways that school and system personnel worked together to identify practical solutions to complex and real problems shows that the above assumptions about school and system personnel are inherently incorrect. I discuss further outcomes of the Transient Students Project below.

### **Outcomes achieved by schools and the system**

In May 1996, when I joined the Poverty and Isolation Team, a number of tasks needed completion. These included documenting the project outcomes and continuing to move schools and the system forward in thinking about students who were transient. These goals were achieved in a number of ways. A system definition of transience was accepted, a booklet about transient students was published and distributed to South Australian schools (Edwards 1998), the definition of student transience was incorporated into the departments' administrative system software computing package (EDSAS) and a module was written to enable the system to identify and 'track' students who are transient. A significant outcome of the project has been the system-wide acceptance of who is a transient student. This definition is as follows:

[T]he term transient is used to describe a student who has enrolled in a school three or more times in the previous two calendar years (excluding structured transitions at CPC to R, 2–3, 7–8 [or 6–7] and 10–11). (Edwards 1998, p. 1)

I note with interest that this definition has been accepted in part by *Changing Schools* as an appropriate definition of transience. However, the definition is expanded somewhat to incorporate the following.

Mobility has the potential to impact either positively or negatively on student learning outcomes where:

- a student has more than two moves in three years; or
- patterns of family movement involve students in relocating school for periods of time when they do not attend school. (DEST and DoD 2002, p. 26)

I have one main criticism of the above that I will briefly discuss here. It is too broad to be useful in practical application. The definition adopted in South Australia through the Transient Students Project takes into account structured transition points. Without recognising structured transition points, many additional students may be identified.

For example, if a student transfers from the eastern states to South Australia in year 7, they would have made the transition from primary to secondary (from year 6 to 7) in the eastern states. At the end of that year, they would make another transition from primary to secondary (years 7–8 in South Australia). This scenario is not uncommon. For this reason, the definition above fails to capture the students who are most disadvantaged by high mobility, because it is simply too broad.

In writing the booklet about student transience in South Australia, my intention was to ensure that the topic was made broader than a concern about Aboriginal students.<sup>6</sup> I felt that if the topic was positioned as about ‘only’ Aboriginal students a number of schools and school personnel might not see how this issue affected the students in their schools. There are a number of issues that are more generally relevant, including disruption in the lives of both the students who are transient and students in the host school, as well as the pressures on teachers in schools where there is high mobility. Coupled with this, schools with high student mobility commented on the costs (time and material) associated with receiving students who are transient. Examples include enrolment and induction processes as well as the provision of consumable items to students who may not remain in the school for long.

Through my work as a student counsellor at the Open Access College I was aware of a number of other reasons for student transience. These included student illness, students excluded under the School Discipline Suspension, Exclusion and Expulsion Guidelines (Education Department of South Australia 1989), behavioural issues, students who are refugees, students of service personnel, students whose family is itinerant, children of transient workers in a circus, fruit picking, shearing and a range of other occupations as well as students whose parent(s) are imprisoned. The common thread between these students’ lives was the issue of poverty.<sup>7</sup> A brief review of the literature at the time of the Transient Students Project revealed a dearth of studies in Australia and overseas. However, the literature did reveal a range of prevailing attitudes, especially in the US where these students were often described in negative ways. In Australia, the majority of work about this topic has been undertaken by the Australian Defence Forces. They have developed a range of strategies to support students, their families and schools. My interest and focus was on simple and practical solutions to some of the issues. It was also important to focus on resource-neutral solutions and strategies as far as possible.

**Who gets to ‘hold the pen’?** In this case, I got to hold the pen. This is because I came in at the end of the project and the task of writing about the work fell to me. I identify this as an issue for a number of reasons. The importance accorded to the person who gets to hold the pen in these projects is often uneven. There were two parts to the project, and my part was to finish off the tasks of the project. These tasks

included pursuing the acceptance of a system definition of transience, ensuring that this definition was incorporated usefully into EDSAS, and writing the booklet. I am attempting to make two points here. Firstly, in any project, there are a range of tasks from conceptualisation through to publication and these tasks are undertaken by different people. Secondly, the people who conceptualise the projects are often not there at the end, so often there is confusion about where these ideas and conceptualisations came from, and the privileges that flow from these types of projects are often attributed unequally. I will return to this point further on. My organisational memory of the Transient Students Project is that school-based people in the TAMS Network came up with the original idea and managed many tasks for the project and, as curriculum writer, I ended up holding the pen.

This holding of the pen, as with most writing tasks, is not a solo effort. I enlisted the help of school-based personnel outside of the TAMS Network to demonstrate how broad this topic was. There were a range of other schools who grappled with the issues of high student mobility from a range of perspectives. For example, refugee students moving a number of times before finally settling within a community is an issue for Ascot Park Primary School. The Open Access College deals with mobility around student illness, behaviour management, transient workers and a range of other complex and intersecting issues. Enfield Primary School, located near a women's shelter, deals with the issues of domestic violence and the subsequent mobility of children in these circumstances. In short, a variety of schools were then, and still are, finding innovative ways to deal with these topics every day. Through broadening this topic to include a range of circumstances, I hoped that the topic of transience would be not solely a topic positioned as belonging to Aboriginal schools, and therefore able to be positioned as someone else's problem. In the same ways, I hope as a system we are all concerned about addressing the needs of the children of service personnel. This is what we in the department would describe as being 'strategic' and it is often not something that can be achieved by researchers outside of the system. However, as the PETA case study described in 'Backtracking' and mentioned below shows, it is possible for university researchers to adopt a range of strategies to position their work more effectively in schools and the system.

**Privileging and valuing particular views and products** What is at issue here is how the products of research in schools and universities are unevenly privileged and valued. That is, school-based and system-based personnel are often justly angry when they are not accorded credit due in the public domain from their work. This is because in large research projects supported by universities often the last one standing is not a school or system-based person. School and system-based people are often re-deployed at the end of the fieldwork, and are often unable to enjoy the credit of their work that arises from publications. Those who are able to enjoy the privileges



of seeing their work culminate in written products and who are able to theorise and think about what is happening in schools are often university-based. Writing and publishing are requirements of employment in universities. However, more often than not, school and system-based personnel do not have the luxury of linking their work to these types of products and outcomes and there are differences in the ways that this kind of intellectual work is attributed to the department or the university as authors.<sup>8</sup> To their credit, the authors of 'Backtracking' acknowledged some of these concerns when they wrote the following:

When one looks at educational research from the perspective of practitioners/policymakers and, therefore through the intervening 'connecting web', it is clear that academic research – while valid and valuable – has not proved itself to be a higher form of knowledge than knowledge acquired through conversation with and observation of one's colleagues. The flaw in assigning privileged status to research can be almost wholly summarised in a remark by Fullan (1993: 23) ... '[People] act as if they only have to explain an idea, although they themselves have spent months or years in their own analysis and debate about it. If they deny others the chance to do the same, they treat them as puppets dangling by the threads of their own conceptions.' (Figgis et al 2000, p. 356).

There are a number of issues above that create oppositions between the work of schools and the system and university-based researchers. In summary, school and system personnel do not have the luxury of benefitting fully from the research they are involved in, because the system has a focus on practice and implementation and sadly intellectual work is often rushed over in order to expedite solution finding. Secondly, the privileged university-based research is often considered inaccessible to the main constituents who should be benefitting from the work. This is both because teachers do not have the time to engage deeply with the intellectual work of others and because sometimes these accounts are written in ways that exclude these constituents. This exclusion occurs in a range of other ways as well. I described some of these earlier and I will add to them here. I will describe below how communicating with the constituents of educational research is critical to making research both accessible and useful to schools and the system. I am not positioning school and system-based personnel as deficit here; rather, I am making the point that researchers often write for their peers in the research community and these overly complex theoretical arguments often shed no light on the real problems confronting schools.

It can be difficult to see what change the researchers are aiming for because of the overly complex ways in which they describe their work. Often, their task is to write

a text that will gain the respect of their peers because that is how the rewards for their work are organised. Secondly, it is patronising to assume that the teachers and school personnel consider all research to be new knowledge. Often teachers consent to their practice in class being observed. Subsequently, they have seen descriptions of their work rendered incomprehensible by the researcher. In some instances 'tried and true', or 'tried and failed' strategies are represented by some researchers as new knowledge. A student participant in the 'Students Completing Schooling Project' commented about the report *Listen to Me, I'm Leaving* (Smyth et al 2000): 'my life is in here and I can't understand it'. It is for these reasons that the experience university researchers purport to reflect, understand and shape must be accessible to their constituents. 'Backtracking' does identify some areas that researchers could attend to in the business of making change and new knowledge and I discuss these below.

**Making change** There are two topics I will discuss here. These are the immediate usefulness of research and communication. These are both connected with the topic of change. It is often thought that teachers want to know how the theory changes what they do in their classroom tomorrow. I have heard this levelled as a criticism of teachers. However, as demonstrated in the Transient Students Project, teachers, rather than resisting change, recognise the value of learning how to do things differently. They are interested in the immediacy of research. It does need to be presented in ways that facilitate its implementation.

Secondly, researchers, if they value their role as change agents and knowledge creators in schools, need to ensure that their research is accessible to teachers, schools and the system. In 'Backtracking' teachers who talk about educational research and how it applies in schools are those 'engaged' in conversations about the research by the research team. In the PETA case study, 'researchers took care to present their material in a way that energised the listeners – not, as in so many conference settings, as an *exercise in showing how smart the researcher is*. And they have gone on sharing their insight long after the funding and academic "pay-off" for the project has ceased' (Figgis et al 2000, p. 318, emphasis added). Therefore, the outcomes of research that school and system personnel take up are those that are presented in ways that teachers can relate to, are communicated effectively and can be implemented in real schools.

Engaging teachers in the conversations about the research and showing how it is linked to their day-to-day experience is essential if ideas generated from research are to be taken up. This was a strength of the Transient Students Project. High student mobility has long been an issue and this project connected with the day-to-day lives of teachers. That is, the strategies and approaches developed facilitated change about a real issue in real schools.

These strategies and approaches are documented in the booklet (Edwards 1998). However, this publication does not engage with educational theory. This was not an objective of the project.<sup>9</sup> However, I return to my point that schools and the system are mostly interested in practical solutions not in the production of high theory. They are interested in theory that connects with their day-to-day business in real, not imagined, schools.

Therefore, there is a balance that needs to be found between the theory and practice in research projects if recommendations are to be taken up in schools. However, this is not always the case. For example, I worked on the Students Completing Schooling Project<sup>10</sup> (SCSP) and at the completion of the SCSP I wrote two documents for schools. These documents translated the information from the two chapters I wrote in *Listen to Me, I'm Leaving*, (Smyth et al 2000). I rewrote the key ideas from Chapter 5 'When is early school leaving OK?' and Chapter 6 'Navigating a transition from school' and developed two student-based research topics and discussion pieces for school staff. These were titled 'Working the double shift: part-time work and full-time school' and 'When is early school leaving OK?'. The department has no plans to publish these documents. So, despite a concerted effort to promote change emerging from research in schools, even those who are well connected, well placed, strategically experienced, astute and working within the system itself are often unable to make this happen. And sometimes there just seem to be no reasons for decisions like this.

**Ongoing learning** 'Backtracking' cites ongoing learning as an issue facing school and system-based practitioners. Ongoing learning is needed by teachers in systems that often do not value continued study as a worthwhile activity for staff.<sup>11</sup> Even the best efforts of university researchers to communicate with teachers and the system are hampered when learning organisations do not promote the learning of their own staff. The lack of interest about improving the learning of their own staff in some departments does not absolve researchers of their responsibility to communicate with their constituents. However, the following are summarised as the 'three elements on the research/researcher side of the equation need[ing] attention if the connection between research and practice/policy is to be most effective':

- **Publication** – researchers (and funders of research) need to develop more targeted and imaginative mechanisms for publishing research findings;
- **Networks** – mechanisms need to be created which facilitate researchers, policy-makers and practitioners coming together into focused and sustained networks; and
- **Incentives** – researchers need incentives to take their work to the school education 'industry'. (Figgis et al 2000, p. 357)

The three strategies above are critical in making research more useful and accessible to constituents. I will take up the third point, incentives, in the section that follows and describe why transient students are an issue now.

## **Why are we talking about transient students now?**

Who has picked up the baton for transient students? I want to turn the discussion now to the document *Changing Schools: Its Impact on Student Learning* (DEST and DoD 2002). This report was 'prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training and the Department of Defence'. As I have mentioned above, the Department of Defence has been proactive over a number of years in putting the topic of high student mobility on to the agenda. My point here is that high student mobility is a topic worthy of examination, yet university researchers appear to show little interest in pursuing it as a research topic. What are the incentives that could be provided to encourage university researchers to develop and implement a project that examines the issues of high student mobility? I will discuss three possible incentives below. These are topic sexiness, change in schools and production of academic theory.

Firstly, on first appearances transient students lacks the 'sexiness' of a number of other research topics. However, much of the previous research has focused on psychological testing. Therefore, the topic is ripe for new approaches that incorporate critical sociological understandings. A student research strand, a student 'voice' strand and a strand that involves developing computer technologies for the secure transfer of student information between states make the topic more appealing. There would also need to be a policy strand that involves working with each of the states on information transfer policies and protocols.

The second and third points are related, and they concern what university researchers are paid to do and what they are required to do. A properly conceptualised research project that focuses on transient students might result in change in schools – but what then for the production of academic theory? Is it possible to be both a successful university researcher and academically successful? It depends how these two achievements are measured. The production and documentation of new ideas is considered to be important work in academia. Good academic work results in DEST points, ARC grants, tenure and promotion. But in schools the production of new ideas is only important if it translates to new ways of doing things. Research is about building on the work of others, but the pressure on academics is to generate original work that will be published, regardless of its usefulness. 'Backtracking' describes academic journals as being read by few people and largely inaccessible to practitioners in the field. Academic journals are the domain of a few privileged

people, and their escalating costs ensure that they remain inaccessible. They are overly complex and economically unaffordable. How is it possible to be academically successful as a university researcher and promote and contribute to change in schools?

The future transient students agenda is clearly being set in *Changing Schools* by DEST and the Department of Defence. This is not a bad thing. Research is supposed to answer real-life questions and to increase what we know about a topic. Yet I remain perplexed as to why this exciting and rich topic is one that has not been taken up by the research community. The issue of high student mobility cuts across a broad range of the education literature and the pay-offs for investigating this topic are significant. I hope that by discussing the work on the transient students project I will generate more discussion about this topic that will hopefully culminate in some exciting 'forward-generating' and 'backward-tracking' research. As outlined at the beginning of this paper, if the Transient Students Project journey is to be measured against the user-centric model (Figgis et al 2000) this project is still only entering the middle section, that is, the connecting web, or learning space. There is still much to be done.

## Conclusion

Messages are translated incidentally, deliberately or accidentally between the research and the implementation. The ideas may just be evolving as they are translated down the line. These translations may make the research more accessible and relevant to schools and the system. It may also be accidental, and this indicates that the modes of communication selected and utilised by the researchers are inadequate to the task. Whether the outcomes are better or worse is of course a matter of personal judgement. The assumption made in 'Backtracking' is that these distortions of pure research make the original research unrecognisable. If this is the case, then the researchers are not meeting the needs of their constituents in schools and the system. The evidence provided above about the Transient Students Project shows that schools and the system support research that assists the day-to-day management of the complexities inherent in contemporary schooling. And that means that sometimes they just have to do it themselves. There is no shortage of research topics for those interested in working in positive ways with schools and the system.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The origin of this statement is unknown.
- <sup>2</sup> The Transient Students Project investigated the issues surrounding high student mobility between schools in South Australia. The project ended in December 1996. In this paper I do not attempt to conceal the identity of the schools or system. These are already on the public record and published in case studies and acknowledgments in the documents I refer to here.
- <sup>3</sup> The quotation from which I have paraphrased ‘forward-generating research’ is as follows: ‘It is important to point out that across the backtracking studies, the individuals we interviewed and observed are best labelled as “vanguard”. They were the practitioners/policy makers who might have been expected to reach back to research (or forward to generate research)’ (Figgis et al 2000, p. 346).
- <sup>4</sup> The National Curriculum Statements and Profiles were a joint project of the States, Territories and the Commonwealth of Australia initiated by the Australian Education Council (1994a, 1994b).
- <sup>5</sup> Teachers and schools are exposed to considerable scrutiny from universities by student teachers and postgraduate researchers as well as university researchers. They are also scrutinised by the system itself that requires outcomes, measurement and reporting against an increasing range of criteria. In addition, scrutiny occurs through the eyes of the students, their parents and the rest of the community. Researchers hold considerable power over the ways in which teachers and schools are represented in accounts of research projects. Invariably, the position of the university researchers is privileged in these accounts and the teachers and the students become the object of the gaze.
- <sup>6</sup> However, I believe that Aboriginal students who are transient are possibly the most severely disadvantaged students in the educational system.
- <sup>7</sup> Following a conversation with a member of the armed services who had a role in supporting the children who are transient, I was made aware that some personnel in the armed forces such as general recruits receive low incomes.
- <sup>8</sup> An example from my own work is the publication of *Students-as-Researchers Approach: Facilitating Student Research into Social Issues* (DETE 1999) where the department is attributed authorship. This is a common experience amongst officers who write for the department. Intellectual work is regarded differently by universities where the writer retains authorship (moral and legal). However, I note with interest that recent guidelines from the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee (AVCC) attend to these issues of authorship in greater detail than in the past.
- <sup>9</sup> I did engage with counselling theory in a small research project I completed for my Masters in Social Science (Counselling).
- <sup>10</sup> The ‘Students Completing Schooling Project’ was a three-year collaborative research project that investigated the issues around early school leaving in South Australian schools. The three partners in the research were the Flinders University of South

Australia, Department of Education, Training and Employment (now the Department of Education and Children's Services) and the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia.

- <sup>11</sup> I completed my Masters degree in 1997. As required I notified the Teachers Registration Board of South Australia and phoned the department to inform them of my upgraded qualification. The comment from the departmental officer taking my call was, 'You don't get any extra money, you know'. Nor was there any acknowledgement from my employer.

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