



## ***LINK 17: Blue Hills State School (Queensland)***

### ***Case Study***

#### ***PUBLIC PURPOSES OF SCHOOL ARC PROJECT***

[Note: pseudonyms have been used throughout]

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## *Summary of Key Findings*

### **1. Public purposes (PPs) as a focus for the school**

- Students are the main focus of the school
- There is a strong focus on PPs as underpinning values/beliefs of the school e.g. Big 6 as an overt core set of values for driving the school – relationships, curriculum etc
- Evidence of an overall coherence in valuing and practising these across principal, staff (teaching & support), parents
- Social outcomes are equally valued along with academic outcomes
- The school has a highly diverse student group – varied backgrounds, languages, socio-economic status of families
- Different backgrounds of students (language, ethnicity etc) are not seen as a barrier or a problem – but a strength to be valued – this is a view driven by the principal
- The school exhibits inclusive enrolment policies – see above diverse student group – although it is enrolment managed i.e. it cannot take any more students and must enrol students from the local area first
- There is strong and purposeful support for students with needs (eg ESL)
- The (community) reputation of school reflects PPs

### **2. School culture**

- Reflecting above – this is supportive, collaborative and inclusive rather than competitive and exclusive
- The principal at “heart” of school culture – evident through actions, conversations, modelling
- The Big 6 values are evident in the school – practices, actions – Big 6 developed from the ground up in the school, by the school – students engage with these in the classroom to “understand” them
- The school collaborates with like-minded local primary schools
- The school is a part of the local community and a support base for many – what would happen if it weren’t there?
- The school is a happy harmonious one
- Positives are highlighted eg staff meeting affirmations

### **3. Teaching staff**

- Very supportive of focus and direction of school – it would be challenging to teach there if they were not!
- Staff are strongly supportive of principal and opportunities she offers
- They see no “big deal” about the challenging nature of some of the student body – important work to be done
- Teachers are supportive of each other – they work collaboratively, not competitively
- There is a general sense that they are happy to be at Blue Hills

#### **4. Other staff**

- As above – they are supportive and positive about building an inclusive collaborative school
- High levels of collaboration and support evident across teaching and other staff

#### **5. Parent/community**

- Very supportive of principal and school in building an inclusive collaborative school – contributes to culture and goals
- Some parents specifically choose Blue Hills for their children because of its ethos – building understandings and acceptance of diversity and difference

#### **6. Students**

- The students present as happy and confident
- There is significant diversity among the student group – this does not translate into disharmony among students
- All students are seen as achievers
- “Harmony awards” re-enforce positive student actions and achievements
- Student “behaviours” are built around and re-enforced by the Big 6

#### **7. Curriculum**

- Social outcomes are developed along with academic outcomes
- Some students may be disadvantaged by “externally” imposed curriculum and accountability requirements – see below – the staff are aware of this and it creates frustrations
- Big 6 embedded in classroom practices
- Arts and environmental aspects evident – school has a significant and successful art program
- Students with needs are catered for – supported by resources as can be

#### **8. Leadership**

- Principal has a very clear vision for the school and sort of school Blue Hills ought to be
- The principal is critical to school focus, direction, values etc
- The principal has moved the school to a more inclusive collaborative one from previous times
- Teachers are supported to experiment with ideas – developing leadership capacity among teachers and others
- Non-teaching staff also play leadership roles in the school

## **9. Key challenges**

- The pressures of externally imposed curriculum and accountabilities (eg state-wide tests) that may be inappropriate for some of the Blue Hills students (at least at the time they may be administered)
- What happens to the focus and direction of the school should the principal leave – what transitions can be put in place to manage this in the event it happens – the schools needs a special person as principal to maintain and develop as it has/is
- A similar point could be made about key staff and parents.

## *The Case Study*

### **Methodology for the case study**

This case study was conducted across 2008 and undertaken by an academic and a research assistant from The University of Queensland.

The school was identified as a possible case study site following discussions with the President of The Queensland Association of State School Principals (QASSP) and a number of senior officers of Education Queensland (e.g. two Executive Directors [Schools]) who knew Brisbane primary schools particularly well. Key criteria in the identification process included those schools that exhibited - in action - purposes of schooling that were clearly consistent with notions of public purposes and where social outcomes were a prominent focus for the school. A number of possible options were offered. The academic, who had worked with most of the schools some years ago in a different role, also contributed some thoughts to the identification process. The school finally chosen, Blue Hills, was also quite close to where he lived, such that he was aware of its profile, “reputation” and standing in the general community. It was also important to involve a school that was reasonably accessible for the two researchers.

The principal was contacted by email towards the end of 2007 and provided with information about the research project (nature, focus, scope) and invited to consider if she might be willing to be involved in the project. Following a positive response, The academic suggested he attend a staff meeting (to which several key parents were invited) to outline the project and seek agreement among staff and parents for participation. This was held early in 2008. Those attending the meeting were informed that they would be asked to contribute their ideas through involvement in interviews and/or focus groups about the school and the purposes of schooling and how these purposes might be enacted. Both staff and parents responded enthusiastically to the invitation.

Data for the case study were collected across 2008. The academic visited the school on a number of occasions during this time to meet, usually informally, with the principal, staff and parents. The Research Assistant undertook the major data collection role, conducting interviews, focus groups and collecting materials (e.g. documents, photographs) for analysis. Across all such visits, the school community members were welcoming and supportive of the researchers and willingly gave of their time (and their ideas) to the data collection processes.

**Data Sources** for the case study was obtained as follows:

- *School Documents*
  - Annual Reports 2006, 2007
  - Presentation paper prepared by the principal for the First Education Ministers Biennial National Forum, *Sharing innovation and excellence in school education*.
  - School Newsletters
  - School Prospectus
  - Various school policy documents, including the Responsible Behaviour Plan

- Staff meeting Minutes
- School Website
- Student test data e.g. from State testing programs

- *Interviews, Focus Groups and Observations*

All interviews and focus groups were recorded using a digital recorder then transcribed in full. Transcripts were returned to interviewees for final comment and agreement. The final agreed to transcripts were then analysed. Interviews and/or

Focus Groups were held with:

- Principal – on two occasions, multiple observations
- Acting Principal – this person has acted in the role in semester 2, 2007
- the English as a Second Language (ESL) Teacher and other specialist teachers (e.g. Art)
- P & C Representatives – president, treasurer, member
- Part time Staff Member
- Parent
- Teacher Focus Groups (x 2)
- Teacher Written Responses – all teachers who either participated or not in either interviews or focus groups were provided with the interview schedule electronically and invited to provide any comments they felt necessary. This was done to ensure all teachers had a chance to comment as well as providing the opportunity for those, even involved in focus groups, to provide further comment if they so desired.

As well as the interviews and focus groups, both researchers had the opportunity to be involved in less formal observation activities (and some participation activities), such as attending staff meetings, participating in classroom activities, walking casually around the school (both during class and non-class times) and attending lunch and morning tea with staff and some parents. The impressions gained from these activities assisted in developing deeper insights and understandings into the “life” of the school adding considerably to the richness of the case study data. The researchers regularly shared key impressions gained in this way.

- *Reflective Journal*

The Research Assistant kept a reflective journal throughout the data collection, recording thoughts and impression about the school, actions of the principal, staff and parents and evidence of (public) purposes of education in action. These were regularly shared with the academic for discussion, with such reflections adding again to the richness of the case study data.

## **Brief history of Blue Hills State School**

Blue Hills State School was originally established in 1890 as Drake State School (Prospectus, p. 2). The buildings are heritage listed and the school currently faces the challenges of limited space and a changing mix regarding student population. It has a proud tradition of educating generations of families in the local area, one which has changed considerably over the decades. The school is located on a main arterial road in an “older” area of Brisbane and is about 6 kilometers from the CBD. As a general trend, one side of this road is characterised by higher social economic families, the other side those less so.

In the early 1980s, the school welcomed students from refugee backgrounds from Vietnam. In the 1990s, students whose families had fled from the Bosnian-Serbo-Croatian conflicts began enrolling at the school. During 2000, students from African nations arriving in Australia as humanitarian refugees came to Blue Hills; some were orphans and many had never known school. At the same time as opening its doors to waves of refugee migration, Blue Hills was and still is the neighbourhood school for generations of local families (Best Practice in Literacy and Numeracy Submission, 2008).

The school is enrolment-managed; that is, families must live within a specific catchment area before their children can attend the school. School enrolment is at a maximum and draws from a local catchment area which includes families from affluent middle class backgrounds (e.g. there is large hospital close-by with many professional families with students at the school), in addition to those families whose experiences are that of less privileged socio-economic conditions (e.g. some of whom are refugees). In 2007 Blue Hills established and staffed a school Arts Centre dedicated to the development of the artistic skills and talents of its students. Also in 2007, Blue Hills school community welcomed its first cohort of Preparatory Year students. Careful planning and a commitment to the ethos of multi-age education ensured the young learners enjoyed a highly positive start to school.

**The School Vision is:**

*We are a community that respects individuals and believes that cultural diversity can enrich all our lives. Our children enjoy a holistic education in a caring, nurturing environment. Their academic and social skills, emotional development and creative talents are encouraged to grow so that each child excels in their own way. We embrace change as a means of preparing learners for the challenges of a complex future. Our mandate is to give children the best start on their life-long learning journey.*

Noteworthy in the School Vision is a powerful acknowledgement of the importance of more than just academic or private purposes of education.

## **School context**

### **1. Student enrolment and profile**

Blue Hills State School currently has an enrolment of 260 students covering 35 different cultural groups, for which all are carefully catered through the various programs offered in the school. Approximately 75% of the school community is white Anglo-Saxon coming from countries such as New Zealand, England and so forth, while the remaining 25% include diverse African nations, the Philippines and some other Asian cultures (Transcript – Anna p. 24), Afghanistan and Iraq (Annual Report, 2007).

Staff comments regarding students (and their differences) indicate this is not a matter of concern for them as staff, nor for the students:

*My big one here is that the children don't recognise difference, there's so much difference. They're totally unaware. If you ask them what racism was they wouldn't even be able to explain it. I don't think if a child came here in a wheelchair, and sort of disability obvious physical, I don't think there would be hardly a comment (Focus Group 2, p. 6).*

*They'd just take it in their stride, wouldn't they? There's no comment to difference. They (the students) just don't even recognise it. Difference is normal isn't it? That's right. Difference is normal. Difference is normal here for everybody... The community speaks 54 different languages, you know, that's our clientele (Focus Group 2, p. 6)*

Physically, the school covers a relatively small area, yet boasts its own swimming pool, a permaculture garden (Annual Report 2007; Journal) currently under development and a selection of colourful displays, many of which have been created by the students. The principal explains this *garden project is a perfect example of how parents who have an interest in that aspect have assisted with the establishment of the perma-culture garden program and continue* (Anna 3, p. 3). A ceramic wall mural, also created by the students, bears witness to the scope of the specialised arts program available within the school which recently has been in possession of its own kiln for the firing of pottery.

A selection of photographs of visiting dignitaries grace the walls of the reception area, along with a selection of student work which changes from time to time. This gives a sense of pride in the school itself and also in the achievements of both staff and students. While well over a hundred years old, many of the school buildings have been renovated and refurbished such that classrooms and other buildings are generally of a high standard and well equipped. A comment by a staff member highlights the benefits of a pleasant environment:

*I haven't mentioned how much...being a creative person and a picture person, how beautiful it is to come into the school and look around and see beauty, brightness, flowers, garden. It's a tiny school but with what we've got it's just managed so beautifully, so that is really important. I'd been to other schools where, you know, the bare basic minimum, no colour, you know, dry biscuit school, compared to here which is rather like a bit of a fruit salad. There's nothing I'd change (Terry, Transcript p. 6)*

Religious instruction is available for the students each week when a number of visiting clergy from both Catholic and Protestant affiliations visit the school. The students share a time of singing, storytelling and instruction in their particular faith. The sisters from the "Missionary Sisters of Charity", adorned in white saris with dark blue trim, sit on the floor with the younger children as they conduct the lesson. Generally the children seem to respond well to this aspect of their work, although some are obviously far more familiar with the concepts of their faith than are others. This is possibly due to the fact that some students receive additional input in this area from their own families and are therefore more knowledgeable regarding the specific concepts being discussed. Students who do not belong to the Christian faith are not required to attend religious instruction. There is a prayer room provided for those



students who wish to pray during the day. Only a small number of students make use of this (Journal).

The 2007 Annual Report notes that Blue Hills values highly the strength of its multicultural school community. A focus on developing the “whole child” academically, socially and emotionally continued to permeate the school ethos. A continued strong emphasis on proactive anti-bullying strategies was reflected in school opinion survey results:

Student satisfaction that the school is a “good school” remained above state averages for the third consecutive year. Parent satisfaction with the School Climate was significantly above “state” and “like-school” averages for the second consecutive year. Parent satisfaction that their “child is safe at this school” was significantly above state and like school means for the third consecutive year. Staff satisfaction with school morale remained significantly above “state” and “like school” averages for the third consecutive year.

Positive parental involvement is welcomed and encouraged at Blue Hills. Parent satisfaction in the area of “school – community” relations was significantly above state average (based on the School Opinion Survey data). Specifically, parents’ satisfaction with the opportunities they have to participate in the life of the school was significantly above state average. Parents and community members make valuable contributions to the education of students through:

- assisting in class lessons as volunteer helpers;
- sharing their personal expertise in collaborative teaching programs; and,
- actively supporting the Parents & Citizen’s Association and related activities.

Productive community partnerships are well established with local high schools, local church (which is close by) and the Department of Multicultural Affairs. This is detailed further later.

The staff room, located close to both the administration office and principal’s office is large and airy, allowing a good deal of natural light. It offers a congenial atmosphere where staff members offer genuine greetings and share information during the morning breaks and lunch time. A parent recently renovated the kitchen area of the staff room. A number of local newspapers are available for perusal. Communication is usually face-to-face, but staff mailboxes are located in the staffroom for the distribution of memos or other relevant material (Journal).

## **Principal and school leadership**

The principal (Anna), now in her ninth year at Blue Hills, is innovative, focused, forward moving and supportive of both students and staff with a determination and a commitment to excellence. She is driven by the belief that *every single child has the right to succeed, and can succeed* (Transcript p. 7), and maintains a high profile within the school, assisting with special needs students, visiting classrooms, managing the student leadership program, and choosing to undertake playground duty (Journal, p. 1). Having overseen the progress of one generation (Prep to Year 7) through the school, Anna is very familiar with the students and their families and displays an obvious interest in their progress and well-being. She seems to know all the students

by their first name and many of the parents. Her background – as a child of immigrants from Russia to Australia - appears to have contributed significantly to her commitment to the languages program currently operating within the school. Anna is bilingual, possessing a Russian heritage and did not learn English until attending school. She is currently in the process of learning Italian (Journal, p. 3). Beyond this she has a special interest in special education and learning difficulties and has worked for some years in these areas (Transcript, p. 1).

Anna “maps out” her plan for the school (extract from presentation to First Education Ministers’ Biennial National Forum, 2008):

*Growing an **inclusive school culture** was necessary. A culture that saw multilingualism and multicultural diversity as strengths to be valued, not deficits. A school that broadened programs that may have initially targeted special groups, such as refugee students, across the whole school so that every child could benefit.*

*Establishing **high expectations** for all students in terms of learning and behaviour was crucial, then regularly reviewing and raising the bar to maintain optimum performance. Naturally this translated into high expectations of teachers which couldn’t happen if the principal was seen as the only leader.*

*Strong **leadership** meant that teachers had to be leaders too. They needed permission to “risk take”, to try new ways of doing things that better suited the needs of their students. As long as they could answer “yes” to our three key questions: “Is it in best interests of our students? Is this the best we can do? Are we prepared to be accountable for the outcomes?” they knew it was OK to try new things and supported if something didn’t work out. Moving teachers out of their ‘comfort zones’ required an understanding that every person deals with change differently. Each teacher needed to be seen as an individual and supported in different ways to help them transition through the stages of change, while at the same time retaining warm but demanding relationships with me and with each other.*

Anna states clearly that her commitment, as principal of the school, extends beyond the school itself and into the wider community, explaining *I have a responsibility to this community and the children of this community* (Transcript p. 12). Her transfer as principal into Blue Hills State School was not with the intention of utilising the promotion as a step toward further promotion, but rather to contribute to the school and build the community, an undertaking which had proven successful at a previous posting. Her determination in this area is seen in the careful consideration and monitoring of programs before they are implemented and incorporated into the school curriculum together with a desire to ensure that each student is able to obtain those things he/she needs to succeed in areas of personal growth and academic progress (Transcript p. 2). Her prime commitments are clearly to the education and development of the students, framed within an understanding of the needs of each individual. This concern for individual students was evident in her frustration at the potential negative impact the national tests might have on some students who are clearly not in any position (e.g. from language, background, previous learning) to respond to the questions posed in the tests.

Anna's air conditioned office, although quite small, offers a welcoming atmosphere. It is visually inviting. Along with a laptop computer, her desk boasts a colourful display of small ornaments, and the walls are arrayed with student artwork, staff photographs, a selection of cards given to her by students and others, in addition to a carefully stitched patchwork wall hanging created by one of the parents. It is from this office that Anna assists (one-on-one) an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) student with his plan for the day, thereby settling him into his daily routine before he moves into his usual classroom setting. She displays patience as they work through the daily plan together, giving particular emphasis to his feelings at that time. This is part of an individual management plan which helps the student to increase his own level of awareness regarding his feelings and his level of anxiety present at the time. In turn this fosters a better, more focused start to the day (Journal).

At different times throughout the day, students who have worked well, will bring their work to Anna for additional approval. She takes time to speak with each one, commending them for their praiseworthy efforts (Journal).

The following comments illustrate some of the key leadership characteristics of Anna as principal:

*One of the other good things too is Anna will let us try stuff that might not be, it might not be mainstream, and if we want to have a go at something and, you know, and we're not going to hurt anybody, she'll say, "Go for it, give it a try" and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but she'll back you (Focus Group 2, p. 6).*

*With the older kids, when Anna places somebody in a class, she tries very hard to match the personality of the child with the personality of the teacher, to bring the best out of the kid. And if you look at the home classes in the MP program, you do have a lot of kids who are very much like their home class teacher (Male teacher, Focus group 2, p. 11).*

*The team that we've got here, and you'd have to give Anna a wrap because she hand-picks teachers who come here, she's chosen well, but I think she doesn't have to lead because she's chosen so well. It's lessened the leadership that she has, well the management, that top-down heavy leadership that she has to do...Her leadership has allowed her to push the whole feel of the school, and she can focus on that and not on other stuff (Male teacher, Focus Group 2, p. 16).*

*Well I think she's, I think she's got a vision that she was...from the time she came here she had that vision. She's got a, I guess, a background where she does embrace diversity herself from what she was doing with her learning difficulties background I suppose, when she was teaching in that field, so I just think she's brought that vision with her, and over the years it's, you know, developed and grown and been embraced (School Librarian, Focus Group 2, p. 16).*

*She's picked people who share the vision, and got rid of people who don't, you know (Male teacher, Focus Group 2, p. 16).*

Parents similarly endorse the positive influence the principal has had, and is having on the school, noting *Ms Vanda has been a great, you know like a great principal, and I think that she's doing a fantastic job* (Anne, Transcript p. 5)

- **Challenges for the Principal**

Anna arrived at Blue Hills in 2000 and faced a number of challenges. The expectation for those students with a language background other than English was very low, and the expectation for refugee students, who were often survivors of severe trauma in their home countries, were even lower. From this beginning, the long-term dream was born with the aim of creating an environment:

*focussed on student outcomes both academic and social. Within this “dream” the challenges presented by the complexities of the school were seen as opportunities for improvement. A multi-faceted approach for school renewal was commenced* (Best Practice in Literacy and Numeracy Submission, 2008 p.3)

The following observations of the principal provide valuable insights into the challenges and approaches taken by the Anna since arriving in 2000 (extract from presentation to First Education Ministers’ Biennial National Forum, 2008):

*Arriving in the year 2000 I saw, not surprisingly, a school facing the challenge of balancing the needs of a culturally and linguistically diverse student population, while at the same time meeting the needs of a socio-economically divergent local community.*

*However, what did surprise me were some beliefs that prevailed about student learning. Not being able to speak English was generally considered a problem, a deficit, and these students were often not expected to achieve highly. Expectations were even lower for students from refugee backgrounds. And the kids were doing a great job meeting these low standards in their learning and in their behaviour.*

*As an English as a Second Language learner myself, it was unthinkable to set low standards for kids like I had been. And as a believer that every child can succeed regardless of their background, this school presented a real challenge. Interestingly, as I got to know the community, I found quite a few people who shared my beliefs. I saw some good teaching and met teachers passionate about their craft. The “raw materials” so to speak, to re-build this school were there. They just needed a good plan and an architect willing to project manage the construction for a sufficient length of time!*

*So we set about rebuilding the school. Our dream was to create a school where kids could learn well regardless of their starting point, where they could feel safe and be happy.*

The concept of challenges presenting as opportunities for improvement is indicative of the overall outlook of Anna. She tackles any difficulties that arise with confidence

and determination, together with a desire to achieve the best possible outcomes for the students in her care.

## **Staff (general)**

Staff across the school, both teaching and administration, come from a variety of backgrounds and offer a diversity of experience which contributes significantly to the character of the school. Most teaching staff hold a Bachelor Degree (67%) while some members hold a Diploma in Teaching (33%) (Annual Report, 2006). There are 5 members of staff in the junior school (Prep – Year 3), and 8 in the middle school (Years 4-7). A number of these staff members take on additional roles such as health and physical education, and human relationship education. Other teachers are employed for learning support which includes learning difficulties, English as a second language (ESL), a developmental guidance officer, and a speech language therapist. A further 3 teachers are employed to operate “special programs” within the school such as the school library, ICT and visual arts. Teacher aides are employed to assist across Prep to year 7 (Prospectus, 2008). Blue Hills State School has an experienced and highly stable teaching staff whose average length of teaching experience is 14.8 years (Annual Report, 2007).

From the beginning of this study all staff members have appeared enthusiastic, open and very willing to communicate on a number of levels, both professional, and in some cases personal. Visiting classrooms, at times without prior agreement, was freely accepted as part of the study, and staff appeared welcoming and comfortable with this degree of interaction, often including and even utilising the presence of the researcher in a given setting. For example, appropriate greetings were practiced in the Italian Prep class, and reading aloud or practicing vocabulary was a frequent occurrence during a visit to the ESL class where at times, The Research Assistant willingly adopted the role of Teacher Aide, thus lending some level of reciprocity to the overall nature of the interaction.

Parents are particularly supportive of staff as Kath emphasised (Transcript 1 p. 5):

*and the general community feel of the school I think is a really important part of a child enjoying their schooling years, and I think our experience is enriched by the nature of the teachers, you know, and the extended community*

The teachers themselves expressed confidence in the quality of their Blue Hills teaching colleagues:

*There are some staffs that have deadwood or a dodgy teacher, ... you can look around this place and there's not one, you know, everybody who works here works flat out, and they're bloody good* (Male teacher, Focus Group 2, p. 11).

## **Individual Staff Members**

Blue Hills has a number of ‘specialist’ teachers who make a valuable contribution to the school, and who has interesting insights into the school’s operations.

- *ESL Teacher*

Mary specifically applied for the position at Blue Hills with the intention of working with the New Arrivals Program that was operating at the time (Transcript, p. 5) and has been there for a period of 7 years (Transcript, p. 4). She appears to be a very compassionate teacher who has a deep concern for her students and their parents. She is very open and sincere and has the capacity to be a strong advocate for the students. In a discussion with a colleague, Mary endeavoured to help another teacher understand a particular difficulty faced by one ESL student. Advocacy in this case can be extremely difficult and must be handled very diplomatically and tactfully if one is to achieve the desired outcome (Journal). Mary herself confirms this aspect of her work when she explains, *a lot of my work too is talking to the teachers about why children might be behaving in the ways that they do* (Transcript, p. 5).

Prior to the interview commencing formally, it was necessary to discuss some pressures being faced by one family, of which Mary had only recently become aware. This helped Mary to talk it through her concerns and enabled her to focus more effectively on the interview (Journal). Mary wishes to build an attitude of trust between herself and the ESL families within the community and acknowledges that *it can almost take up to 3 years to have that closeness, so that they can trust me* (Transcript p. 3).

Mary states decisively:

*what's driving me at the moment is because I'm feeling that I'm nearly at the end of my teaching career, so I feel I've got some years left and I guess what I want to do is work with students who have got particularly high needs – perhaps this is the group that has one of the highest needs in schools – because I feel that I've got some experiences with teaching, working at schools, and I'm able to give the time because my family have left, you know, I've got the time and energy to give to them, so I guess that's my drive, just the fact that I might not be doing all that much longer. I think I want to share what I know and can do, and try and share what I know with other teachers, before I disappear* (Transcript, p.3).

Mary's caring nature was obvious within the class setting and she was always pleased to have the researcher come in and greet the students. It provided another avenue of communication for the students and another person who could show interest in the work in which they were involved at the time.

- *HRE Teacher*

Terry has been based at Blue Hills for 5 years (Transcript, p. 3) and her desire *to make a difference in people's lives* (Transcript, p. 1), together with her very varied personal experiences seemed to fit well with the idea of her teaching the Philosophy program within the school. *I had the confidence to recognise I thought differently, probably more in an artistic way, but I think I'm just creative, creative with my hands, but also creative with my mind* (Transcript, p. 1). She considers her ability to *look at things from the kids' points of view* (Transcript, p. 1) a very definite asset and maintains that *if there's a behaviour problem, if you can find the problem it will explain the behaviour, and so you just work with that, not at it or on it, or whatever, but you just work with that, and with the child to keep themselves...to help them learn to be as*

*much in control as anyone can by* (Transcript, p. 1). Terry views her role as a teacher as being both important and significant and operates from a central belief that *everyone is amazingly important* (Transcript, p. 2).

## Parents

When asked about Blue Hills, one parent commented, *We love it, we love the school* (Kath, Transcript 1, p. 1). *I don't think there's anything that we would imagine that Ella could be doing in a State school that isn't already happening here* (Kath, Transcript 1, p. 2). Kath is not only a parent but also works on a part-time basis in the front office/reception area – she is thus in an excellent position to observe what is happening in the school from a number of different perspectives. She notes that:

*You know, what I love about the school and what I loved about it from when I started learning about it, was that they didn't just do the things that every other school, you know, they did all the extras as well, things like HRE and philosophy, those sort of things were hugely appealing* (Kath, Transcript 1, p. 2).

There is a very supportive cohort of parents associated with the school, 10-15 of whom regularly attend P & C meetings, *work with the school on issues of curriculum, and they endorse school policy, and fund raise* (Kath, Transcript 2, p. 1). Volunteers also assist with the school canteen and also the uniform shop. The parents to whom the researcher had access were extremely positive in their attitude toward Blue Hills and both the principal and the staff spoke well of the supportive nature of the parents who were able to make themselves available to assist. Some difficulties can arise in this area as a number of the parents are ESL and not fluent in the English language which does inhibit communication in some ways such as sending notes home with the students (Kath, Transcript 2, p. 1).

Rosemary provided some interesting insights into some of the key considerations evident for parents when choosing a school. These included a strong sense of community, multi-age, and multiculturalism.

According to staff members there is limited parental support for the school – in terms of the actual numbers of parents actually active in and around the school – apart from a strong smaller core group of parents who are very active. This is primarily as a result of the number of professional parents who are working full time and others such as *a group of single parents who are struggling and doing it hard* (Focus Group 2, p. 4). Part of this could also be due to a change in the area. One staff member explained, *It used to be a very poor area with a lot of unemployment. Now, because of the house price and because we're so close to the CBD, the families that can afford to live here now have to work to be able to afford to live here* (Focus Group 2, p. 4)

One teacher noted that *our 'clientele' is changing dramatically and quickly* (Focus Group 2, p. 5). This is reflected in the attendance levels for parent/teacher interviews. *Now it is really good, whereas before it was, you know, you might get a couple if you were luck* (Focus Group 2, p. 5). However, there were still some students (and their families) not attending such school events.

- *Parent Involvement via P & C*

*The P and C works incredibly well at this school....We have a monthly meeting....We have been fairly active in sourcing grants....The P and C works with the school on issues of curriculum, and they endorse school policy and fund raise (Kath 2, Transcript p. 1). There's a core group of about 12-15 who come [to each meeting]. A further 15 form a support team for the various activities (Kath 2, Transcript p. 3). A sub-committee of the P&C operates the canteen one day each week with the help of volunteers, although it is difficult to get volunteers (Kath 2, Transcript p. 3).*

Another sub-committee of the P&C operates the uniform shop for half an hour each Monday morning thereby giving parents the opportunity to purchase both new and second-hand uniforms as required. *The P&C is also very keen on playing a social justice sort of role as well, so we often do give uniforms to kids that need them (Kath 2, Transcript p. 4). Kath reports that particular effort is made to have all new students in uniform from their first day thereby endeavouring to lessen any sense of difference (p. 4).*

Kath observes that *this is a difficult school to fundraise in, in the sense that we have a lot of ESL families, a lot of lower socio-economic families, and that's a difficulty getting their participation (Kath 2, Transcript p. 2). Anne agrees:*

*Because I'm on the P&C Committee, and we know how hard it is to fund raise, I mean it's just...you can always see how there would be...that if we had more facilities and more money to put towards things that we could improve the facilities, we could improve the resources that the school has, and I'm sure that's probably something that a lot of schools have to deal with (Anne, Transcript p. 4)*

## **Curriculum**

Anna provides some important comments regarding the some of the essential aspects of the school's approach to curriculum and her particular approach to leadership (extract from presentation to First Education Ministers' Biennial National Forum, 2008):

*... the school **curriculum** needed to be reformed to re-engage kids, especially in the middle school. Once the bed-rock was laid, we had a foundation on which to create the pattern of our school's operation which allowed improvements in learning especially literacy and numeracy.*

*In reconceptualising our curriculum we drew heavily on the work of Andrew Seaton and his "**Four Curricular Forms**". Reframing our curriculum around these four pedagogical forms increased the 'time and space' available for teachers for "Focussed Learning Activities" especially in English and Maths. As well as the conceptual mind-shift away from the "integrate or perish" approach, there were organisational imperatives. The whole school operations had to be reorganised to make uninterrupted teaching and learning time for literacy and numeracy blocks. This involved extensive negotiation with specialist teachers and other schools, and ultimately led us to new staffing paradigms.*



*We had to reprioritise and redistribute resources to support these critical literacy and numeracy learning times. Teachers had to re-thinking and re-structure their classroom programs to accommodate this renewed focus on explicit teaching. This leads me to the next piece of the story that I've called **pedagogical integrity**. It encompasses three aspects.*

*Firstly, we had specialist teachers who knew how to teach English as a second language. **ESL pedagogy** is all about knowing where a child is at with their speaking, listening, reading and writing and knowing where to go next. It's about providing enough scaffolding for long enough to help them get there. It involves lots of rich language modelling, a strong use of visual cues and lots of explicit instruction. Its just good teaching practice so why not extend this pedagogy into all mainstream classes to benefit all students regardless of their linguistic background? So we did.*

*Secondly, we understood the importance of developmentally appropriate learning experiences. We knew that kids learnt at different rates. We had a successful multi-age class in the junior school. Why not expand **multi-age** learning opportunities across all grades, especially into the middle school where so many kids were struggling? So we did.*

*And thirdly we believed in **early intervention**. We knew that the earlier young children who may be "at risk" for literacy or numeracy success get help, the better. Why wait until after the Year 2 Net funds come through to set up intervention programs? Why not redirect school funds to help these little kids when they were ready for the help? So we did.*

*The next piece of the pattern is **distance-travelled data** and, more importantly, what we **did** with it. I was invited here today not because Blue Hills has the best Year 3, 5 & 7 results in QLD. We don't. What we do have are cohorts of students who have shown significantly consistent statistical improvement in reading, writing and numeracy tests from Years 3 to 5 and Years 5 – 7 over a number of years.*

The school sees its "signature" curriculum offerings as including (Annual Report, 2007)

- multi-age approach to teaching and learning in junior and middle school;
- specialised Middle Primary (MP program) Years 5 – 7;
- language Other than English (Italian) taught from Prep to Year 7;
- Human Relationship Education program (Prep to Year 7);
- specialist Visual Arts programs (Prep to Year 7);
- Visual Arts Enrichment program (Year 4 - 7);
- Performing Arts "Show Choir" Enrichment program (Year 4 - 7);
- Performing Arts Junior Voices program (Year 1 – 4); and,
- Instrumental Music programs: keyboard (piano) Years 1 – 7; Strings Years 3 – 7.

Extra curricula activities include:

- before and after school tennis coaching;

- after school “Fun Fitness” program; and,
- camp program for Years 5 – 7.

Computers are integrated into curriculum units to assist student study in all grade levels from Prep to Year 7.

- *social outcomes*

With a view to education the “whole child”, time and attention was devoted to making Blue Hills a happy and harmonious school where children wanted to, and could learn by

- strengthening and expanding the existing Human Relationships Education (HRE) program;
- reframing the Responsibility Behaviour Plan around a model heavily focussed on proactive programs and the affective curriculum; and,
- defining a core set of values that drive the school, known as the ‘Big 6’ (Best Practice in Literacy and Numeracy Submission, 2008 p.5).

Anna notes the following with respect to social outcomes (extract from presentation to First Education Ministers’ Biennial National Forum, 2008):

*Now the final piece of the mosaic - **social outcomes**. It was important at the outset that diversity among students at Blue Hills did not translate into disharmony. So educating the “whole child” was seen as crucial, with social skills being important scaffolds to academic success. For this reason, time and attention was devoted to:*

- *Strengthening and expanding the existing Human Relationships Education (HRE) program to explicitly teach conflict resolution skills, anti-bullying strategies etc.*
- *Reframing the Responsible Behaviour Plan around a model heavily focussed on proactive programs and the affective curriculum.*
- *Defining a core set of values that support success then embedding these values into day-to-day education.*

*Improved social cohesion has led to improved relationships. The strength of relationships between teachers and students, and the inherent impact this has on the achievements of students especially in the middle years, has been clearly evident.*

- *internal monitoring processes*

The school has a number of **Internal Monitoring Processes**. These include:

- early intervention programs established for students “at risk” re literacy and numeracy (Year 1); and,
- whole school assessment and data gathering were introduced to inform teaching protocols.

- *school culture and leadership*

The approach taken to a school renewal process included the following element:

During this phase of school renewal teachers were “encouraged to “risk take” in trialling new approaches to determine those most suited to the needs of their students”. Key questions posed for the any new approach, and re-iterated by Anna regularly among staff, were:

- Is it in the best interests of the students?
- Is it the best we can do?
- Are we prepared to be accountable for outcomes”

- *curriculum reform*

There was a strong focus on literacy and numeracy. This included rearranging the school timetable to allow blocks of uninterrupted teaching time for literacy and numeracy. Professional development and mentoring was provided to assist changes in pedagogy in the

Middle Years Program. “Students in the MP Program learn in multi-age classes and are grouped into developmentally cohesive groups for English and Maths” (Best Practice in Literacy and Numeracy Submission, 2008 p.3). The MP Program was established in 2002 to meet the needs of students in this critical learning phase (years 4-9). Outcomes of this program include:

- positive self concept about themselves as learners
- confidence in establishing relationships
- willingness to face new challenges
- increasing their level of initiative and decrease their level of dependency (Best Practice in Literacy and Numeracy Submission, 2008 p.4).

One teacher observed:

*I think the MP program is a huge plus in preparing them for high school. They really take time to learn what it means to be organised, and learn what it means to be responsible, and I mean we’re one of the few who are actually teaching that, and that’s a good thing (Focus Group 2, p. 5).*

- *curriculum priorities*

Blue Hills has a number of what it calls its curriculum priorities.

- Human Relationships Education (HRE) – (Self smart/people smart)

This program includes weekly lessons for all classes from Years 1-7, and focuses on the four key areas of self-esteem, relationships (including conflict resolution), growth and change, communication cooperation and decision making. The purpose of this program is to educate students to understand both themselves and others, thereby fostering an increased tolerance and acceptance of individual differences and uniqueness (Prospectus).

The positive outcome of such education is highlighted by the comments of a parent explaining an interaction with her daughter some years earlier:

*One of my favourite things was my daughter was in about grade 2, and she was talking about a fellow student, and I said to her “Who’s that student, I know*

*their name but I can't place him, what does he look like?" and she said "Oh you know...he's really good at maths and running, and he does this, this, and this", and I went...and I still couldn't place him, but the thing that she never said to me was "Oh, he's that Asian boy, he's that Chinese boy", because I think for adults, a lot of us would name someone by ethnicity or cultural group, whereas for kids at this school it's just he's another kid, and "...these are his abilities, these are what he's good at", not "This is his cultural background" or "This is what he's bad at" and I thought that was just really lovely, and it sort of taught me a bit of a lesson about myself, about how I label people, where our children are so much wiser, and I think that's something that comes through in this school because of the multiculturalism and the anti-bullying (Rosemary Transcript, pp. 3-4).*

Another parent offered a similar comment:

*I remember she was only in grade 1 and we were at one of those big indoor play centres and she'd been gone for ages and I said, "Who wee you playing with?" and she said "See that boy over there, he's got the..." and I went "Which one?" She went "The one in the brown jumper", and her was an African boy, and I thought, you know, that says a lot that she's not defined him by his colour, by his race, it was by his jumper, you know, pick out the kid in the brown jumper amongst all the other different clothing, and that" been important for us to reiterate all that stuff that we have sort of talked about at home. I think it's nice that that sense of community is carried through (Kath, Transcript 1, p. 4).*

- Foreign Language Instruction (Word Smart)

Italian is taught from Prep to Year 7, thereby encouraging all students to build a foundation in a language other than English (Prospectus). The importance of learning a second language is modelled by the principal who is also learning Italian (Transcript – Anna p. 3). This is viewed as an advantage for students who would otherwise have only English - of course, for many students this well might be a third language they are engaging with including English and perhaps their own original language. Upon meeting the Italian teacher in the staffroom, the conversation is casual, but in Italian. It is reported that Anna is quickly gaining an understanding of the language. This is possibly due to the fact that she is already bilingual which appears to offer an advantage when undertaking the study of additional languages (Journal). From a student perspective, a prep year lesson witnessed by the researcher was entirely in Italian, except for only a very few words which were used for clarification when necessary. The lesson consisted mostly of singing, with a focus on greetings, weekdays and body parts (arms, legs, eyes, face etc) (Journal).

- Visual Arts Enrichment Program (Art Smart)

Instruction is provided to all students from Prep to Year 7 by a specialist visual arts teacher, encouraging all students to participate and to develop their skills. This program has the potential to cross cultural barriers. *Art's its own language, you don't have to speak English to do art. There will be kids in the class that don't speak English, but they see the other children doing things and can interpret it* (Rosemary, Transcript p. 11). Gifted students may be invited to join the enrichment program (Prospectus). This program is not restricted to drawing and painting, but is extended

to include such experiences as textiles, print making, ceramics and associated techniques (Rosemary, Transcript p.9-10).

- Philosophy in Education

This program encourages students to think, reason, reflect and communicate and to incorporate these skills into the academic and social arenas and is taught from Prep to Year 7 (Prospectus). Encouraging students to think things through and talk them through helps to foster positive social outcomes between students, and also between students and staff members.

In a playground situation where something had gone wrong between two boys the teacher took the time to ask, “What could you have done?”, “What else could you do?”, offer some suggestions to the student in question and then ask the boy to stop and take a breath before proceeding. It was not a case of the wrongdoer being chastised, but rather a logical thinking through of alternative actions that would have resulted in more acceptable consequences (Journal).

There is strong support for the philosophy program. One teacher observed *the big thing for me is that it’s taught the kids how to disagree politely and respectfully* (Male teacher, Focus Group 2, p.9). The School Librarian commented:

*I think Philosophy has been an interesting innovation, just to see how the kids, particularly as we see it I think go from prep right through. I think once we see them coming all the way through with it, we’re going to see a lot more high-level thinking from a lot of the children* (Librarian, Focus Group 2, p. 9).

- **Other programs**

**Big 6 Value Set** referred to earlier permeates the whole school and was developed from the ground up by the school community. With respect to these, Anna notes (extract from presentation to First Education Ministers’ Biennial National Forum, 2008):

*A core set of values, known as the “Big 6” drives the school and defines expectations of all members of the school community, including students and teachers. ... We know through the wisdom gained from our experience that a strong relationship exists between learning outcomes and **social outcomes**.*

The Big 6 Value Set encourages students to learn to take responsibility for their own behaviour, and places a strong emphasis on the following values:

- community
- resilience
- integrity
- opportunity
- respect
- embracing diversity.

The school developed the Big 6 through a series of workshop activities for the school community just before the commencement of the case study research. They replaced a previous framework of operation and practice. It is expected that they are embedded

in all aspects of school life. The academic observed one class engaging in a lively discussion among students as to the real meaning (in action) of some of the values. They appear not be just a set of words, but a foundational set of values and beliefs for all in the Blue Hills school community. The school belief system reflects the ideal that students, teachers, staff and parents have the right to feel safe at school, to be treated with dignity and respect, and to learn, teach and/or work in a supportive environment (Responsible Behaviour Plan, 2008).

Staff (teachers and administration personnel) are expected to operate within this framework and develop classroom expectations and routines accordingly. Values and professional responsibilities are clearly defined under the key headings of the Big 6, with a vast range of examples being provided for each category (Values and Professional Responsibilities). Students are encouraged to align their behaviour with the Big 6 through an award system designed to reinforce appropriate behaviour, both in the classroom and in the playground. Rewards can accompany the green cards that are issued to students on a random basis. Yellow and red cards also form part of the Behaviour Influence Plan (Responsible Behaviour Plan, 2008).

*The behaviour management plan is a huge bonus. We have had very little trouble with Ella (our daughter) in terms of, you know, being uncomfortable in the playground and, you know, playground type incidences, as opposed to other friends who have a weekly issue with something happening at other schools. That's really important to us. I think her emotional wellbeing is as important as her academic sort of ability, and extension (Kath, Transcript 1, p2).*

The value and contribution of the Big 6 Value System can be seen from a parental perspective when Rosemary (parent) commented:

*Well S's (our daughter) got some friends and she actually finds it a little bit frustrating because she'll go through the logic of situations, or she'll...they'll look at her a little bit blankly, you know, she'll sort of say, "Well, that wasn't a really good way of embracing diversity" or "I don't think you're showing a lot of resilience there....and when they look at her blankly she'll then turn around and explain that, you know, in a community these are the things that we value".... I think I can definitely see the difference in her way of relating and handling things compared to children in other schools of a similar age....I do really believe there is a real difference, that the Blue Hills kids think and relate is quite, I believe of a really high standard. I think there's a difference (Transcript, pp. 5-6)*

- Girl Talk

This is a proactive program provided by the behaviour support services section of Education Queensland. It is aimed at learning to help others and developing strategies for coping with life. Initially the principal is required to nominate a target group and also list 3 specific outcomes for the program. Girl Talk is an intense program operating half day (in some schools a full day) each week for 6 weeks. It is designed to provide a small group of students (in this case 10 girls) with a forum to discuss issues. The focus of most of the exercises is on teamwork and the activities are often designed to push the participants to a point of frustration and then work through the feelings each one was experiencing. For example, questions posed

included: How were you feeling when you could not accomplish the set task? How did you go about solving the problem or completing the set task? How did you feel when you actually did accomplish the set task? What were the strengths you noticed? How was working in a team helpful?

- **School student leadership team**

The team is comprised of ten students for the year, inducted during the month of April. Members of the leadership team are expected to uphold the values of the school (Big 6) and model them for other students. To reinforce this expectation the principal had a meeting with the team to check on their progress. A number of team members had received yellow card which denote a “warning”. The principal explained that those who had received warnings were in fact letting the rest of the team down, and reminded them all to “Give your best at all times”. Emphasis was placed on taking responsibility for their own actions, taking control of their own behaviour, and the need to be accountable when taking a leadership position within the school. Emphasis was also placed on students being given an opportunity to improve and also succeed (Journal).

A comment from Rosemary whose daughter was a student leader highlights the benefit of such opportunity:

*Oh she's grown about two feet taller!!!.... She wants to be a strong role model for others. She wants to do the right thing, so she's really gone out of her way, and her confidence, not that she had a lack of confidence before, but her confidence has just grown so much since she's been a school leader, and it's been brilliant (Transcript, pp7-8).*

Further comments from Rosemary emphasise the nature of the opportunities offered to student leaders:

*She said the first time she had to take parade and it's no mean task when you're 11 years old, to stand up in front of close to 300 people with parents and the rest, she said the first time she was a little bit nervous and then... because they're actually taking it, everyone's...she said the next time she had to do something, she said, “You know Mum, I stood up there and I didn't even really notice there were people out there. I was so calm I had a look at my notes and had a bit of a talk, and it's really fine, it doesn't bother me at all now”, and I thought, “Isn't this amazing?”, and it's something that the kids are, all the way through, they do their speaking in class and they're always encouraged to have the confidence to do this public speaking, and by the time they get to be a school leader or they have to step up there on parade in front of the whole school, they can do it, and this is the sort of thing that adults, you go to Rotary or somewhere to learn how to public speak, because we can't do it, and she's stepping up there saying, “I can do that”, and it's not just her, it's any number of kids (Transcript p. 8).*

Four of the leadership students were observed by The Research Assistant as they fulfilled some of the leadership responsibilities as they helped to conduct the

information day for the parents of new students about to commence their schooling time at Blue Hills. One, Stephanie, who spoke at a local garden show, addressing an audience of approximately 150 people indicated that although she was “pretty nervous” she was also “pretty proud of myself”. She also commented, “I don’t see myself showing leadership. It’s just something I do”. Stephanie was a mid-year arrival who took time to settle into the school and feel comfortable. She says “the teachers were always there for us” and that school is “never boring”.

The second, Josh, was described by the principal as “a quiet achiever – steady, stable and reliable” who has attended Blue Hills school since Preschool. Nicholas is an indigenous boy who had some significant behaviour challenges during Years 4 and 5, but “stepped up to meet the standard of leadership”. Jasmine, a Filipino girl and now a student leader, faced some very significant behaviour challenges from Years 2-7, but now appears to have “grown up and matured” and is able to play a meaningful role in the leadership team.

This program helps students to realise that they cannot operate well from a solo or self-centred perspective, different people have different strengths, and that as a team one can accomplish more than in an individual state. The HRE teacher is attached to this program, and can also turn to the facilitator for advice and support should other issues arise in the future (Journal).

- **Student performance – outcomes**

Overall, students at Blue Hills perform very well on external standardised tests. The 2007 Annual Report notes that “(g)iven that percentage of students for whom English is a second language ranges from 21% - 38% across the year level cohorts that were subject to national testing, achievement of students continued to be cause for celebration in 2007.

Student results in the year 2 Diagnostic Net remained significantly above state averages and Education Queensland targets in all domains: e.g. 90% of students identified as not requiring additional support for reading; 95% not requiring additional support in number; 95% not requiring additional support in writing.

Years 3, 5 & & Test results were also of a high calibre. Particular highlights included the performance of students in Writing – 91% of students in Years 5 and 96% of students in Year 7 achieved national writing benchmarks. This is indicative of the strength of the school’s literacy programs.

The percentage of students satisfied that they are getting a good education at Blue Hills remained significantly above the state average, increasing to 93% (State result 79%) (School Annual Report, 2007 p. 1).

<p>Anna draws on UNESCO’s “Four Pillars of Education” to provide the pillars to build a great school and to improve student learning – <i>Learning to Know, Learning to Do, Learning to Be, Learning to Live</i>. Commenting on the curriculum and student performance, and the use of data to look to the future, Anna notes (extract from presentation to First Education Ministers’ Biennial National Forum, 2008):</p>
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*The next piece of the pattern is distance-travelled data and, more importantly, what we **did** with it. ... we... have are cohorts of students who have shown significantly consistent statistical improvement in reading, writing and numeracy tests from Years 3 to 5 and Years 5 – 7 over a number of years.*

*In my experience the most productive conversations about achievement data happens when the focus is on using of data as a tool for improvement rather than a chance for recrimination. In the early days at Blue Hills we put in place rigorous whole school assessment and data gathering protocols with the explicitly state intention that it was to inform teaching practice. Initially some teachers found this confronting. But the focus on analysing data simply as a tool for helping kids learn better prevailed over time. Now it's just part of the way we do business.*

*Integral to the success of our data analysis practices has been the notion of “shared responsibility”. All teachers regardless of the grade levels they teach, and I, share responsibility for the achievements of all students.*

Correspondence from Anna’s supervisor in Regional Office provides supportive commentary on the student outcomes being achieved at Blue Hills (A/Regional Director correspondence, October, 2008):

*Blue Hills State School has been identified as one of 14 schools across the state where significant improvement across reading, writing and numeracy tests from Years 3-5 and 5-7 is evident. ... Your curriculum leadership has clearly provided staff with the framework for effective practices that has driven these commendable results ... the school’s success in this endeavour is to be commended. I offer my congratulations to you and your staff on the results that have been achieved over the past two years and wish you continued success in supporting students to reach their potential.*

## **Blue Hills State School in the wider community**

Because of the nature of some of its families, the school provides support for *parents who don’t have a high level of social understanding of systems and bureaucracies and protocols* (Anna 3, p. 1). For example, the ESL teacher provides assistance with Centerlink and Medicare forms. This type of assistance can be provided for perhaps 2-3 years for refugee families.

The school has *links with the local high schools, both state and non-state, where we take students from their high schools to do work experience programs at the school* (Anna 3, p. 2). *The school has a link with QPAST which is the organisation for supporting survivors of torture and trauma” ... This is a reciprocal arrangement. QPAST has in the past provided professional development training to staff members and “we’ve referred families and children to them for additional assistance that we haven’t got the capacity to provide* (Anna 3, p.2).

At a state level the school has a role in providing professional development for teachers across the state, particularly in the area of ESL education. *We have recently*

*been filmed, and our students and our staff used on a state-wide professional development resource package that all ESL teachers in Queensland have been – are currently being serviced under* (Anna 3, pp2-3).

The school also hosts interstate visitors who are coming to see what perhaps is identified as best practice; and international visitors. So this year we've hosted international educators from Sweden who came to see the way that writing is taught in a genre-based approach in a school that has a complex ESL population" (Anna 3, p. 3). The school has also hosted a "delegation of deputy principals from New Zealand who have come to look at the social outcomes programs that we have running" (Anna 3, p. 3) (Best Practice in Literacy and Numeracy Submission, 2008 p.7).

### **Some summary general qualities of Blue Hills State School**

Anna notes (extract from presentation to First Education Ministers' Biennial National Forum, 2008):

*Student and parent satisfaction with the "school climate, especially how safe children feel at school, has been on an upward trend at the same time as literacy and numeracy achievements have improved.*

A reflection of this satisfaction can be found in school opinion survey results that noted that 94% of parents were satisfied that they are getting a good education from Blue Hills, and 97% of parents were satisfied the Blue Hills State School is a good school (School Annual Report, 2007 p. 1)

Staff satisfaction with 'Work Value and Recognition' was significantly above the state and like-school means for second consecutive years (2006, 2007). Staff satisfaction in all other workplace domains was significantly above state means for three consecutive years (2005, 2006, 2007). Overall rating of the school was significantly above state mean for three consecutive years (2005, 2006, 2007), and significantly above like-school mean for two consecutive years (2006, 2007) (School Annual Report, 2007 p.2).

Comment from parents re-enforce this positive view about the school among its community members. *The thing I liked about Blue Hills school as it tended to look at the child, at the whole child. It wasn't just the academic size of things that was important* (Anne, Transcript p. 1). *It embraces diversity, which is one of its values, and it also gives children a chance to meet people from different cultures, and to sort of interact with people from different cultures, which I think is a great experience* (Anne, Transcript p.3)

*I would say that Blue Hills school is very good if you're looking for a small community-focused school, one that tries to look at the whole student, and that it has a diversity of backgrounds at the school, and the fact that they have the Big Six as such an ingrained, or has come in and seems to be such a strong platform as well; the fact that Ms Vanda has such a presence in the school, you know, just the fact that you see her around so much that she knows all the children by name, that...you know, all those things are such, you know, wonderful attributes for the school* (Anne, Transcript p. 4)

A number of summary general observations are now provided on various positive qualities and aspects of “life” at Blue Hills. Anna is seen as a strong leader who is both flexible and very supportive of staff initiatives, evidenced as follows:

- strong leadership (e.g. Mary, Transcript pp. 10 & 13)
- flexible leadership (e.g. Mary, Transcript p. 10)
- supportive leadership (e.g. Terry, Transcript, p. 5).

The key focus of the school is on that which is best for the students. All tasks are undertaken in the best possible way and then the outcomes are evaluated.

Staff appear to know where they stand with the principal and are comfortable with this arrangement. Generally staff believe that Anna will do her utmost to accomplish what is best for the school, and leads by example, always giving of her best. The school has a supportive staff with a positive outlook (Terry, Transcript, p. 5) and there is a strong team spirit among them (Terry, Transcript p. 6).

There appears to be a high regard for the supportive nature of staff at Blue Hills School. This is reflected in comments by the School Librarian for example:

*I think the teachers do a really good job with all the support people they have around them that, as I said, they all just work together for the majority of people, and I guess that's why we as a staff feel we can go and say to someone, "Look, I'm having trouble with this, have you got some suggestions?" and people feel really comfortable with that (Focus Group 2, p. 2).*

She went on to observe that:

*The good thing about being here is that we are a team and when you're working together as a team the rate of change is less on each member of the team, you know, somebody takes up the running on one new thing, and then you ripple in-service each other, and that's great. Everybody doesn't have to reinvent the wheel every time we're told we have to have a new wheel, so that's a very good thing. I don't know how other staffs that are more dysfunctional are coping because, you know, I'm struggling with rate of change in a really good school (Focus Group 2, p. 3).*

*I've been here nearly 16, coming up to 16 years, and just the camaraderie of the staff has changed so much in the time I've been here that they're much more close knit now, and you really have that feeling when you walk in that, you know, it's somewhere where you want to be, yeah, so I've seen that change (Librarian, Focus Group 2, p. 3).*

There are high expectations in the school, on staff and students. The ESL teacher observed:

*Why I like working here, is because there are very high expectations, and I also have high expectations of my students even though they've had limited education. I do think you've got to strive for excellence (Mary, Transcript p. 10).*

The high expectations of the principal are accepted and appreciated by staff as this level of performance is modeled by the principal herself.

The curriculum, even for a relatively small school, is considered rich and diverse. And there are opportunities for enrichment for students (Mary, Transcript p. 11).

*even though it is a small school, it still offers a lot of extra-curricular activities, far more than you would expect at a small school, because I've taught in a variety of schools so, you know, just things like the art enrichment, and there's lunch-time clubs, there's choir, there's gardening* (Mary, Transcript p. 11).

This extended and enriched nature of the curriculum is valued by parents and staff and includes:

- multi-cultural focus and ethnic diversity (Kath, Transcript 1, p. 1 & 4)
- language opportunities from Prep (Kath, Transcript 1, p. 2)
- philosophy & HRE (Kath, Transcript 1, p. 4).

When recommending Blue Hills to another parent, one parent noted that:

*I think it would be the extension of the curriculum, you know, the things like – and I have had this conversation with many a parent – things like philosophy and HRE, and the behaviour management plan, and the general community feel of the school I think is a really important part of a child enjoying their schooling years, and I think our experience is enriched by the nature of the teachers, you know, and the extended community* (Kath, Transcript 1, p. 4)

The very positive school culture and supportive and inclusive child focused ethos is captured in the following observation:

*Every teacher at this school cares about every child... And I don't think that's commonly said at a school, but it's true, and it's like we're a big family and no child is less important than any other child* (Terry, Transcript, p. 4)