

**POWERING-UP TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING****Action Research Project****Dr. Carl Leonard & Mr. Damien Watson****Wirreanda Public School*****Abstract***

NSW Department of Education and Training schools are delivered significant amounts of funding each year as a tied grant to be used for Teacher Professional Learning. Schools are able to utilise these funds to conduct and access internal and external training and development for both teaching and non-teaching staff based on school and departmental priorities including: beginning teachers, use of ICT for teaching and learning, literacy and numeracy, quality teaching, syllabus implementation, career development and welfare and equity. It is essential that schools develop effective procedures for access and implementation of professional learning and the management and delivery of these 'TPL' funds.

Wirreanda Public School (enrolment 557 students), values strong academic, performing arts, sport and positive student welfare programs. The experienced and dedicated staff are committed to providing quality teaching and learning programs to improve student learning outcomes within a supportive school community. Current priorities are the development of quality writing, thinking and working mathematically and the integration of technology in teaching and learning programs.

In an attempt to address these issues, a survey was undertaken of staff perceptions and needs with regard to professional learning at the commencement of the 2009 academic year. Results of this survey showed clear discrepancies in staff satisfaction with access, quality and sharing of professional learning opportunities. This data was then used to devise a new structure for the delivery of TPL at the school, a coordination role for TPL management, timetables for feedback sessions from attendees at professional learning activities, and the assessment of the perceived value of potential activities against specific school targets. A follow-up survey was completed mid- Term 4 to assess the impact of these new structures.

The paper will present the results of this professional learning action research and attempt to identify some of the structures, pedagogical practices and learning designs that may assist in the effective use of professional learning funds, including a structured, ongoing and hierarchical model of staff professional development around quality teaching, and strategies for setting and achieving personal professional learning goals.

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Background

NSW Department of Education and Training schools are delivered significant amounts of funding each year as a tied grant to be used for Teacher Professional Learning. Schools are able to utilise these funds to conduct and access internal and external training and development for both teaching and non-teaching staff based on school and departmental priorities including: beginning teachers, use of ICT for teaching and learning, literacy and numeracy, quality teaching, syllabus implementation, career development and welfare and equity. It is essential that schools develop effective procedures for access and implementation of professional learning and the management and delivery of these 'TPL' funds.

For the purposes of this paper, the Department's definition of professional learning as all formal and informal, individual and shared training and development opportunities that: *provide opportunities for professional discourse, interaction, practice, reflection and analysis* is accepted (pp.4). Various delivery modes are encapsulated in this definition including, face-to-face and online professional learning (NSWDET, 2004).

These funds are delivered to schools to be managed within the guidelines of the Professional Learning Policy for Schools (NSWDET, 2004) that mandates: *the participation of teams and individuals in workplace learning and in the wider professional contexts are keys to developing quality professional practice* (pp.4). The policy argues that professional learning should develop teacher skills, knowledge and understandings thereby supporting enhanced learning outcomes for schools (NSWDET, 2004).

The policy framework requires that:

- *Individuals engage in ongoing professional learning throughout their career;*
- *Professional learning must form part of a school's endorsed school plan;*
- *Schools need to ensure that their professional learning reflects the particular needs of their staff, students, community and departmental priorities;*
- *School are required to establish a professional learning team to plan, implement & evaluate their predication in professional learning opportunities;*
- *There is a requirement for state office, regions and schools to promote and implement quality professional learning in collaborative and collegial environments, the provision of resources and opportunities, evaluate the impact of professional learning and be accountable for the expenditure of funds.*

(NSWDET, 2004, pp.4)

With regard to individual professional learning, the policy states that: *all staff members are responsible for improving their practice by:*

- *Pursuing ongoing professional learning in all aspects of their work;*
- *Critically reflecting on their practice and achievements; and,*
- *Contributing to the professional learning of colleagues.*

Professional learning needs are defined as including skills, knowledge and expertise related to teaching, leadership, management and administration (NSWDET, 2004, pp.5).

This policy framework was refined with the 2005 implementation of the *Professional Learning Continuum* (NSWDET, 2005 – revised 2006). This continuum is: *the framework for planning, delivering and evaluating professional learning for school-based staff and staff who directly support the work of schools* (NSWDET, 2006, pp.2). It is mapped to four capability frameworks linked to the NSW Professional Teaching Standards, the School Leadership Capability Framework, and the Australian Quality Teaching Framework (AQTF) Competencies that, in essence, link career development pathways, key professional strategies and learning programs within this continuum (NSWDET, 2006, pp.2). Importantly, there is scope for flexibility and self-managed pathways within the continuum rather than a fixed career trajectory.

At the time of publication of the Department's policies, educational literature aligned well with the suggested approach to professional learning. Saunders (2004), for example, argued that effective professional learning should develop: *genuine communities of practice based on mutual respect and authentic partnerships to develop networks of learning* (pp.53). This concept was explained as communities that:

- *Reflect on practice;*
- *Reclaim the language of discourse and pedagogy;*
- *Relate professionally with colleagues and collaborate in experiments on teaching;*
- *Reinforce the need for an evidence-driven approach to innovation;*
- *Restore a sense of exploration, invention and creativity to classroom planning and practice;*
- *Create a more naturally paced, naturally scaled reform, school-led improvement*

(Saunders, 2004, pp.165).

Recent literature on school-based professional learning tends also to support the Department's philosophy, arguing that 'authentic' professional learning *'takes courage: first of all it requires recognition of the complexity of school and then a desire for improvement and action'* (Groundwater Smith, 2009, pp.40). Groundwater Smith argues that professional learning needs to promote:

- *Improved pedagogy and practice;*
- *Support teachers in their professional learning;*
- *Maintain / improve professional standards;*
- *Assist teacher professional judgment in the classroom (wise/sound decision-making about learning); and,*
- *Quality teaching.*

(Groundwater Smith, 2009, pp.4)

Significantly, both the use and availability of new technology are advocated by Groundwater Smith who argues that traditional models of professional learning delivery are no longer sufficient. The volume of material now available via electronic self-publication and e-learning are highlighted as significant potential new sources of professional learning (Groundwater Smith, 2009).

One identified feature of effective professional learning that, perhaps could be more clearly articulated in the Department's policies, is the importance of professional learning assisting teachers to become reflective practitioners who constantly challenging their current methods - assessing and evaluating new forms of pedagogy and practice - and engaging with colleagues in discourse regarding the business of learning. Fullan (2007) describes these concepts as: learning in context; developing a professional learning focused culture; conceptual learning built into day-to-day culture of the school; developing a culture that supports the professional learning input and its application. Fullan goes further arguing:

Teachers of today and tomorrow need to do much more learning on the job, or in parallel with it – where they can constantly test out, refine, and get feedback on the improvements they make. They need access to other colleagues in order to learn from them. Schools are poorly designed for integrating learning and teaching on the job. The teaching profession must become a better learning profession.

(Fullan, 2007, p.297)

The concept of teachers adopting these inquiry based roles is not new. Warren Little (1993), for example, advocated that: *the most promising forms of professional development engage teachers in the pursuit of genuine questions, problems and curiosities, over time, in ways that leave a mark on perspectives, policy, and practice* (p.133). In almost twenty years, little has changed with regard to the advocacy of an enquiry based model. Groundwater Smith (2009), for example, argues that: *enquiry-based professional learning holds enormous potential to contribute to a transformative educational agenda, through providing an ongoing catalyst for improved pedagogy and practice* (pp.4). This model is defined as:

- *Inquiry-based Professional Learning is: ‘practitioner inquiry’;*
 - *Focused on transformation of both self and school;*
 - *Collaborative with opportunities for teachers to build authentic collegiality;*
 - *Ongoing, rather than solely project-based;*
 - *Capable of engaging in creating knowledge about and for practice; and,*
 - *Encompassing of opportunities for teachers to develop and hone their professional judgment.*
- (Groundwater Smith, 2009, pp.13)*

A focus of the current research project has certainly been to build and imbed an enquiry based professional learning culture at Wirreanda Public School. Whilst these efforts are ongoing, the results presented below give some indication of progress thus far.

Context

Wirreanda Public School (enrolment 557 students), values strong academic, performing arts, sport and positive student welfare programs. The experienced and dedicated staff are committed to providing quality teaching and learning programs to improve student learning outcomes within a supportive school community. Current priorities are the development of quality writing, thinking and working mathematically and the integration of technology in teaching and learning programs.

The delivery of TPL has been reconfigured in 2009 in an attempt to address the issues mentioned above and this action research has been undertaken in order to ascertain whether the changes are meeting the needs of the staff at Wirreanda.

Overview of Action Research Project

The effective and equitable use of ‘TPL’ funds emerged as an issue with regard to promoting progress towards global departmental and school targets such as quality teaching. In an attempt to address the above issues, a survey was undertaken of staff perceptions and needs with regard to professional at the commencement of the 2009 academic year. Results of this survey showed clear discrepancies in staff satisfaction with access, quality and sharing of professional learning opportunities. Based on these results, the following recommendations were made regarding the delivery of TPL at the school:

- Develop a coordination role for TPL management with the establishment of a Professional Learning Team (PLT) consisting of four persons: principal, deputy principal, assistant principal and a classroom teacher.
- Devise a new structure for the delivery of TPL at the school with tri-weekly 1 hour professional learning sessions established encompassing delivery of both mandatory professional learning (such as health care procedures) and feedback/follow-up on professional learning sessions attended individual or small groups of staff.
- Professional learning session timetables were established to ensure (mandatory) feedback from attendees at professional learning activities, and the assessment of the perceived value of potential activities against specific school targets.
- Teachers were actively encouraged to trial and adapt their teaching practice, undertake ‘mini’ action research projects based on their professional learning experiences, request funds to support these activities, and given a forum to report back to their colleagues.

TPL delivery was accordingly reconfigured and a follow-up survey was completed mid Term 4 to assess the impact of these new structures.

Participants

All 22 permanent teaching staff were asked to participate in this research project in order to ascertain staff perceptions and needs in regards to 'TPL' at Wirreanda.

Collection Methods

A staff survey (see Appendix A) that included eight items/questions was developed to assess teacher professional learning at Wirreanda. This survey had two main purposes; the first being to identify how teacher professional learning needs were being met at that time. The second purpose of this survey was for staff to identify current issues and needs in regards to ongoing teacher professional learning.

Evidence Analysis

A combined, but very basic, qualitative and quantitative approach to analysing this research was used. For three of the questions participants were asked to select from four responses (well, very well, average and poor) to answer the questions posed. For the remaining five questions participants were asked to provide written responses to the questions posed. Please note that, due to the small sample size, formal statistical analysis on the data was not undertaken, but trends in the pre and post quantitative data means are discussed.

Summary of Findings

For questions 1-3, items were rated on a Likert Scale from 'Poor'=1 to 'Very Well'=4. In answer to the first question, "How well are my personal teacher Professional Learning needs being met?", 22 participants responded on both occasions.

Pre:

	Very Well	Well	Average	Poor
1. How well are my PERSONAL Teacher Professional Learning needs being met	I	IIIIII	IIIIIIII II	I

Post:

	Very Well	Well	Average	Poor
1. How well are my PERSONAL Teacher Professional Learning needs being met	IIIIIIII II	IIII	IIII	

The mean for the pre-test was 2.41 perhaps indicating that teachers at Wirreanda felt that, whilst personal teacher professional learning was adequate, there was scope for this to be improved upon. The post-test mean of 3.32 suggests an improvement in the meeting of personal professional learning needs.

In answer to question 2, "Overall, how well do you feel staff professional learning needs are being met?", 22 staff responded on both occasions.

Pre:

	Very Well	Well	Average	Poor
2. Overall, how well do you feel STAFF professional learning needs are being met?		IIIIII II	IIIIIIII	III

Post:

	Very Well	Well	Average	Poor
2. Overall, how well do you feel STAFF professional learning needs are being met?	IIII	IIIIII IIII	IIII	I

This question was concerned with the professional learning delivery to the staff at Wirreanda. The pre-test mean of 2.32 suggests some dissatisfaction with teacher professional learning at Wirreanda. However it must be noted that almost half of the respondents are more than satisfied with the current system. The post-test mean of 2.91 again suggests some improvement in this aspect of our professional learning practices.

In answer to question 3, “*My most beneficial professional learning occurs at which of the following levels:- Stage Meeting, Staff Meeting, PL Sessions (professional learning), Stage Planning Days, DET/External Courses, or Other: please specify.*”, participants were expected to give a ranking to each of the available options.

Pre:

3. MY MOST BENEFICIAL professional learning occurs at which of the following levels :-	Very Well	Well	Average	Poor	MEAN
Stage Meeting	IIII	IIIIII	IIIIII	III	2.15
Staff Meeting		IIII	IIIIII	IIIIII	1.95
PL Sessions (professional learning)	I	IIIIII	IIIIIIII	I	2.41
Stage Planning Days	IIIIII	IIII	IIII	II	2.77
DET/ External Courses	IIIIII	IIII	IIIIII	III	2.64
Other: please specify	III	IIII			(3.38)

Post:

3. MY MOST BENEFICIAL professional learning occurs at which of the following levels :-	Very Well	Well	Average	Poor	MEAN
Stage Meeting	IIIIIIII	IIIIII	IIII		3.32
Staff Meeting	II	IIIIIIII	IIIIII	II	2.25
PL Sessions (professional learning)	IIIIII	IIIIIIII I	III		3.18
Stage Planning Days	IIIIIIII II	IIIIII	III		3.41
DET/ External Courses	IIIIIIII	IIIIII	IIII		3.32
Other: please specify	I	I			(3.5)

From the above responses it is evident that staff felt on both occasions that Staff Meetings were their least valued experience in terms of benefits to TPL. In both the pre- and post- test applications, Stage Meetings, Stage Planning Days, Professional Learning Sessions and DET/External Course were perceived overall as the most valuable forms of professional learning. Significantly, the overall increase in all means tends to suggest that the refinement of our professional learning practices has enhanced the effectiveness of all professional learning opportunities.

The fourth question asked, “*Please outline ANY ISSUES regarding the delivery of Professional Learning at WPS?*”, and a wide range of written responses highlighted the concerns of participants in relation to this area.

Pre:

4. Please outline ANY ISSUES regarding the delivery of Professional Learning at WPS

- Competition for places at courses from colleagues and how decisions are made as to who attends- EQUITY (x2).
- Quality of PL (x3).
- Lack of time given to PL - one respondent felt they were rushed, disorganised or often cancelled (x2).
- Respondent felt staff at WPS are ‘a fantastic resource’.
- Collegial sharing and swapping of ideas on regular basis would be ideal (x2).
- Lack of planning/structure - PL should match priorities of students, staff and school (x4).
- No feedback from staff who attend PL (x3).
- Repetition derogatory (x2).
- Being rostered on Playground Duty every meeting makes me feel I don’t belong to any group.
- Relevance to teachers’ needs (x5).
- Use Staff Meetings more effectively for PL instead of ‘housekeeping’.
- Focus on one area- trial, talk and share, follow-up.
- No chance for individual needs to be met - especially casuals.
- Presenters - quality of.
- Compulsory nature of PL – especially the boring ones.

Post:

4. Please outline ANY ISSUES regarding the delivery of Professional Learning at WPS

- Temporary teacher - lack of participation.
- Not regular enough PL (x2).
- Follow up and sharing of PL – inconsistent (x2).
- Missing PL sessions/ lacked structure.
- Go Maths training inadequate.
- Not enough time spent on PL
- Relevance to stage you are on.

The above responses are indicative of a range of issues relating to the delivery of TPL at Wirreanda. Importantly, staff viewed the process of providing feedback after attending external TPL sessions as a vital element that had been continually omitted or overlooked. It was also noted by several respondents that the relevance of specific professional learning sessions to their needs was lacking on occasions. The final significant point from this question was that staff felt there was a lack of structure and planning to the TPL sessions and that it should match the priorities of the students, staff and school. Over the year, the tightening of our processes appears to have addressed many of these issues, although some inconsistencies still remain.

Question five stated, “*List any areas you feel you require Professional Learning in literacy in?*”, and responses were as follows:

Pre:

5. List any areas YOU FEEL you require Professional Learning in LITERACY in?

- Writing (x7).
- Teaching Reading/ Reading Comprehension (x4).
- Guided reading.
- Preparation of marking in NAPLAN (x3).
- Integrating technology use in Literacy (x2).
- Strategies to move children ahead with literacy skills.
- Talking & Listening strategies.
- IEP/ special needs learning programming.
- Would like to know more about accelerated literacy.

Post:

5. List any areas YOU FEEL you require Professional Learning in LITERACY in?

- Reading group organization.
- More on writing tasks - how to construct a sentence (x3).
- Teaching of comprehension (x3).
- Teaching of spelling.
- Incorporating technology into literacy sessions.
- NAPLAN data analysis (x2).

Participants responding to this section generally agreed that writing was a high priority in terms of required TPL in Literacy, as was reading and comprehension, preparation for National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) marking, and integrating technology. Literacy targets rightly remain a DET and school focus and the post test data suggests some areas for further focus in 2010 including comprehension and writing.

The sixth question, “*List any areas you feel you require Professional Learning in numeracy in?*”, produced a range of responses:

Pre:

6. List any areas YOU FEEL you require Professional Learning in NUMERACY in?

- Numeracy in NAPLAN.
- Integrating technology use in Numeracy.
- Teacher training on “GO MATHS” (x3).
- Working Mathematically (x4).
- Problem Solving (x3)
- All areas.
- Watching/ Observing others on stage who have it “together”.
- Effective A-E assessment.
- TOO much PL in Maths delivered by one consultant - formerly of the DET.
- IEP/ special needs learning programming.

- Implementing maths groups.

Post:**6. List any areas YOU FEEL you require Professional Learning in NUMERACY in?**

- Different ideas and methods of teaching maths - more hands on.
- Make maths more interesting.
- Teaching of problem solving and working mathematically (x2).
- Effective assessment forstering CTJ across stages (x2).
- Interpreting NAPLAN data (x2).

In this section of the research related to TPL delivery in Mathematics, staff responses initially indicated they felt that TPL on implementing the new mathematics program “Go Maths” was a priority as was the area of problem solving and working mathematically. Numeracy was a priority area over the year and there appears to have been some success in addressing areas of need.

Question seven was “*List any Professional Learning you feel you require in other areas?*”, and was concerned with identifying any other areas staff felt they required professional learning.

Pre:**7. List any Professional Learning YOU FEEL you require in OTHER AREAS?**

- Use of new technologies and an effective plan to access and distribute these technologies.
- Technology (x5).
- Behaviour (x2)
- Leadership (x2).
- Principal type administrative duties - Leadership.
- Movie Making and its use in classroom as part of Literacy.
- COGS units for the stage.
- Easy to implement PE/Sports activities using limited equipment.

Post:**7. List any Professional Learning YOU FEEL you require in OTHER AREAS?**

- Interactive Whiteboard – Technology (x3).
- Importance of revision of concepts for mastery.
- Behaviour management.
- Leadership.
- GATS.
- Curriculum differentiation.
- Higher Order Thinking Skills / Habits of the Mind.

Technology emerges as an area that the a number of staff feel they require further TPL in. Other notable areas for professional learning included leadership development and behaviour management strategies, while the requests for GATS, curriculum differentiation and higher order thinking may suggest an increased teacher desire to cater for individual student need.

The final question in the survey asked respondents, “*What do you perceive as areas of whole school professional learning needs?*”, to which participants highlighted:

Pre:

8. What do YOU PERCEIVE as areas of whole school professional learning needs?

- Literacy- Writing (x3), Reading, Spelling.
- Behaviour management - particularly whole school approach.
- Conflict resolution strategies- playground and classroom.
- COGS implementation.
- Phase IV Quality Teaching (x2).
- Structured approach to PL (x3).
- School priorities/needs (x3).
- Consistency - consistent approach needs to be implemented.
- Cross-stage Consistency of Teacher Judgement - particularly in Mathematics (x3)
- What is in the Library in terms of resources.
- Sharing ideas for areas of teaching- stage, school level.
- Reviewing areas of weakness from NAPLAN (x2).
- Diversifying curriculum in time-effective, effort-effective way.
- Higher Order Thinking Skills scope and sequence K-6- a planned approach to developing this.
- Assessment recording and ways the results can be correlated to find averages, etc.

Post:

8. What do YOU PERCEIVE as areas of whole school professional learning needs?

- Interactive Whiteboard – Technology (x3)
- Diagnostic assessment informing teaching (revision).
- Spelling.
- Writing (x2).
- Enhancing student behaviour management procedures - particularly Stage 2 & 3 (x4).
- Reading groups.
- Reading benchmarking-uniformity.
- More PL sessions.

This section of the survey provided staff with an opportunity to prioritise their professional learning needs as they see them in a school context. There was a spread of responses with several sharing the priority status in terms of staff need. Literacy, in particular writing, reading and spelling was highlighted by staff on both occasions. Behaviour management approaches were identified as another area for TPL in the pre-test and continues to be addressed through ongoing professional learning. A more structured approach to the way TPL was conducted was identified in the initial implementation and obviously gave some direction to the changes were implemented in the delivery of TPL. The response for more PL sessions may suggest that teachers are finding the enhanced practices beneficial and are keen for more professional learning opportunities.

Findings, Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Research

Results of this action research project appear to suggest that the following refinements to teacher professional learning delivery at Wirreanda PS have been beneficial in enhancing our professional learning practices:

1. The development of a coordination role for TPL management with the establishment of a Professional Learning Team (PLT) appears to have improved both the delivery and effectiveness of professional learning at Wirreanda PS.
2. The revised structure for the delivery of TPL at the school with tri-weekly 1 hour professional learning sessions (encompassing delivery of both mandatory professional learning and feedback/follow-up on professional learning sessions attended individual or small groups of staff) has been effective in allowing better access to, and sharing of, professional learning experiences.
3. Teachers appear to be increasingly engaging and confident in the role of 'enquiry-based learners' and this has promoted enhanced professional learning practices and collegial networks in a range of contexts across the school.

Finally, it is essential that schools as communities of learning, continually strive to enhance their practices in all areas and these results have applicability across a range of school contexts. Happily results from the post survey will promote further changes to the structure and delivery of TPL at Wirreanda in 2010. An increasingly productive future of professional learning awaits!

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Appendix 1: Staff Survey**Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) at Wirreanda Public School (WPS)**

Please complete survey and return to the PL Team ASAP.

	Very Well	Well	Average	Poor
1. How well are my PERSONAL Teacher Professional Learning needs being met				
2. Overall, how well do you feel STAFF professional learning needs are being met?				
3. MY MOST BENEFICIAL professional learning occurs at which of the following levels :-	Very Well	Well	Average	Poor
Stage Meeting				
Staff Meeting				
PL Sessions				
Stage Planning Days				
DET/ External Courses				
Other: please specify				
4. Please outline ANY ISSUES regarding the delivery of Professional Learning at WPS				
5. List any areas YOU FEEL you require Professional Learning in LITERACY in?				
6. List any areas YOU FEEL you require Professional Learning in NUMERACY in?				
7. List any Professional Learning YOU FEEL you require in OTHER AREAS ?				
8. What do YOU PERCEIVE as areas of whole school professional learning needs?				

Your feedback will assist in enhancing Teacher Professional Learning practices.

