Professional development
from NEMP: the learning
journeys of eight
New Zealand teachers

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The context for professional development

Throughout the 1990s, teachers have been inundated with changes in curriculum and assessment. While professional development has accompanied many of these changes, there has not been enough time for teachers to absorb one change before another has descended upon them. In this respect, teachers can be likened to grasshoppers jumping from one change to another without necessarily looking back or stopping for breath. In professional development terms, this has meant that many of the developments have been left unfinished as pressures have mounted to begin work in other areas.

Working with change

Principals have been caught between ensuring that new developments improve learning and teaching at the school level and at the same time complying with national deadlines for implementation. Change has therefore become more complicated and problematic. Teachers have found that the new knowledge, skills and understandings required to implement the new curriculum documents take time to develop. Not surprisingly, resistance to change has occurred because teachers have been on the receiving end of change for some time and unable to slow the process down to a more manageable pace.

Several of Fullan's (1993) basic lessons of the new paradigm of change are relevant to this discussion about teachers being on the receiving end of change initiatives. He argues:

"You can't mandate what matters (lesson 1)

This means that you cannot force teachers to change their beliefs, and knowledge about teaching. They need time to see the need for change, its relevance to their context and build enthusiasm for the change. Guskey (1986) adds that change has implications for staff development. These are that change is a gradual and difficult process for teachers. It also brings a certain amount of anxiety and can be threatening and to change or to try something new means to risk failure. Teachers therefore need to be convinced that this anxiety will have positive outcomes.

"Change is a journey not a blueprint" (lesson 2)

This lesson demonstrates that the change is a process rather than an event and is unique for each individual. The same path will not be trodden by all and this needs to be realised in the planning of any change.

"Problems are our friends" (lesson 3)

When school change efforts are treated as natural, inquiring minds develop and a sense of ownership and commitment develops.
"Vision and strategic planning come later" (lesson 4)

Personal visions emerge from reflective experience and need interactions with significant others to become a shared identity. These develop and shift over time.

"Individualism and collectivism must have equal power" (lesson 5)

The ideas from individuals and groups as a whole are important for school level change. If teachers do not collaborate they can be in danger of being cut off from inquiry and learning. Isolation is an increasing issue in pressured environments where people can be competitive or try to ignore demands for change and more work.

"Neither centralization nor decentralization work" (lesson 6)

Here an image of a sandwich is useful to understand the message of this lesson. Both the top and the bottom are required for the sandwich to stay intact. The same is true of change where both the national and local levels need to be in tune. One should not squash the other! Those at the national level need to be sensitive to the timing of their initiatives and the presence of other changes.

"Connection with the wider environment" (lesson 7)

Schools need to work with individual students and at the same time respond and contribute to the shaping of learners for the wider society.

"Every person is a change agent" (lesson 8)

A learning organisation where continuous improvements are the order of the day requires commitment and leadership from all participants. Everyone needs to be a leader and a learner. This means that all have a part to play in the shaping of the learning process.

All of these lessons recognise that there is a people dimension to the change process and these have different dimensions in every setting. Evans (1993) also supports this view saying:

"Treating reform (change) as a product and focusing on its structural frame, often overlooks its human face. Change must be accomplished by people".

Change is more than task accomplishment. Adair (1986) refers to a three circles model when considering why change can be problematic. The three overlapping circles belong to task, individual and team needs. Those leading change at the school level need to address all three needs and not just the task aspect. Adair argues that if the focus on accomplishing a task (change) does not consider the people dimension of those involved, then there will be resistance. People will not accept change for change's sake. They need to see the reason for change and to be convinced that benefits will emerge. This process builds ownership and commitment for change. So as the agenda for change continues, there is a real need for change agents to look for different approaches which will excite and motivate teachers as learners. It is dubious whether current methods will suffice in the longer term without attention to these needs.
National education monitoring project (NEMP)

Nationwide monitoring of a representative sample of New Zealand students at the year 4 and year 8 level began in 1995 in all of the essential curriculum areas. There were two purposes. The first purpose focussed on accountability and being able to identify and report patterns and trends in educational performance. The second had a professional development focus where detailed information would highlight where educational practices could be reviewed and improved.

The New Zealand model was developed after close scrutiny of models in other countries. A number of unique features emerged in the New Zealand model. These were:

- the decision to use a 3% light sample
- testing in three curriculum areas per year over a four year cycle
- the secondment of teachers to administer the tests and another group to mark
- the dissemination of written reports and summary documents to the teaching profession show the results and assessment tasks used
- the use of a wide variety of stimulation material for the assessment tasks (photos, card equipment, video excerpts and real life scenarios)
- assessment tasks involving individuals, pairs and groups of four children in practical activities not necessarily pen and paper tests.
- an emphasis on gaining a rich picture of what students know, can do and how they go about it. This involves assessing the learning processes and not just products.

The above features have the potential to improve classroom learning for students if only teachers could become more aware of the possible links and benefits to their classroom planning. Active teacher involvement in task design, trialing, subject advisory committees and marking means that some teachers are receiving useful professional development but the majority of teachers are as yet untouched by NEMP. Without a more widespread impact, NEMP is in danger of being a lost resource to teachers.

The impact of the national education monitoring project (NEMP) reports

Introducing new information to schools now requires a special sensitivity. It is no longer sufficient to produce booklets and circulate them to schools and have the expectation that teachers will find time to read them. The reality is that even the better teachers are struggling to keep up to date with their professional reading and development. If attention is not given to adult learning theory, an understanding of the change and school improvement processes, these documents detailing the assessments of national education monitoring may fall into the same pool of resistance as the curriculum documents.

It is unfortunate that the NEMP reports have been sent to schools without systematic professional development. As a teaching resource, the NEMP reports have the potential to expand teachers' knowledge about what children know and can do. In addition to reporting the results of each task, the reports include details of the tasks used in the testing. These can be used by teachers as examples of assessment tasks enabling information to be gained across a broad range of skills, attitudes and knowledge areas in all curriculum areas. These include individual tests, paired activities and small groups and may be adapted by teachers for classroom use.

A 40% random survey sent to year 1-8 schools in Canterbury in August 1998, showed that teachers were largely unaware of the NEMP reports and their potential for enhancing the quality of classroom programmes. The reality was that while copies of the reports had
arrived in schools, very few teachers either knew of their existence or had seen beyond their covers. Often teachers with curriculum responsibilities had been given a copy of their corresponding report, but beyond a skim read of the contents little had been done. Where assessment tasks had received media attention, (eg the section featuring locational geography in the Social Studies report), some teachers had repeated the tasks to ascertain whether their children's results were similar to those of the nationwide sample.

Typically it had been the principal or another staff member who had waved the covers of the NEMP reports to staff and suggested that they be read. In most cases there was no further discussion because the staff were already focussing on other developments and NEMP was not seen as a priority.

The following comments from teachers represent their common reactions about receiving more documents to read.

"We are being bombarded with new curriculum documents and a raft of other documentation. We only have a 24 hour day, not the 48-56 hours that would be needed to take in your documents alongside everything else!"

"We are very busy people and do not always get lunch times to peruse the flood of material that passes into the school".

"Just another booklet that arrives at school and they go in the pile with all the other glossy publications the Ministry of Education spend money on".

"I don't have time to read a big booklet. As a consequence it goes on the shelf. The fact that the information is really useful becomes secondary".

These comments highlight the pressures on teacher time for new learning even when an acknowledgement of useful content is made.

Learning journeys with the NEMP Reports

The Quality Learning Circle

In February 1999, eight Christchurch teachers joined a quality learning circle to learn more about what the NEMP reports offered teachers. Seven of these teachers had answered the initial survey (mentioned above), with one place being filled by a friend of the teacher who had become an acting principal. This was an opportunity for 'free' professional development with a small group of teachers from other schools and offered them a new network for learning and support. Meetings were held fortnightly during the school day with paid teacher release to enable the teachers to attend. This approach to professional development was new to each of the teachers who were accustomed to professional development at their own schools being led by one of their own staff or an outsider working with the full staff. The quality learning circle was different in a number of ways.

While the quality learning circles model has now found its way into education, it emerged from American industries in the 1960s. It is a model in which employees select a common focus or issue within their organisation, use each other to explore possibilities, and trial new
approaches leading towards improvements being made. It involves talking, sharing experiences and working alongside colleagues in order to learn from them. There is no sense of appraisal or power in this relationship. Everyone is an equal. Contact is purely for developmental purposes which in turn enhance work practices.

Stewart and Prebble (1993) have adapted this model for school settings in recent years. They describe the model they have introduced to teachers in the same school as having the following features:

1. selection of a theme for exploration
2. discussion and story telling within the group about experiences related to the set theme
3. observation in classrooms to enhance the meaning of the stories. (The visitor to the classroom is the learner)
4. discussion of observations in pairs and then with the whole group
5. the sharing of examples of practice with the group

For the purposes of applying the quality learning circles model to professional development with NEMP, a few modifications were made to the model. Membership was accepted from different school communities, age levels taught, and a range of experience as teachers. Bringing together teachers who had not worked with each other before, added a new dimension to the group which was not without its initial hiccups. The group needed to bond and have a shared sense of purpose and direction for its learning. It needed to go through the usual stages of team development, namely forming, storming, norming and performing as participants grappled with the nature of the task, their own confidence levels and acceptance by the group.

Four themes

Fullan's (1999) complexity and evolutionary theories provide a framework for discussion of the four themes emerging from the teachers' journeys with the NEMP reports. These themes include:

- the need for a structure,
- sharing experiences and ideas with other teachers,
- making school visits and
- disseminating learning to other teachers.

Each of these themes highlights the unpredictability of the change process and its application for teachers who themselves have unique needs, circumstances and histories serving to both help and hinder the implementation of change initiatives.

1 Structuring the journey

The biggest challenge was to find a common pathway into the selected theme. For most of the teachers any prior experiences with the NEMP reports had been somewhat brief. This meant they were entering 'unknown waters' and this in itself took them out of their usual comfort zones. Each of the teachers also wanted their work in the quality learning circle to benefit their school situation. Links were desired with existing professional development areas and NEMP was seen as a supplementary resource to enhance curriculum delivery.
This desire to link each school’s priorities with the nine NEMP reports proved to be too broad for the group as a whole to manage. It soon became obvious that if the group were to bind and provide support for its members, then a narrower, common focus was needed. It was therefore decided, by mutual agreement, that the group sessions would focus on one particular NEMP report per time and members would share any details of trialing at the next meeting. It was also agreed that such trialing could move beyond the reports being studied, thereby widening the coverage.

Initially the group struggled with its focus because many of these teachers were accustomed to models with a definite sequence and content to be followed. Unlike the usual professional development contracts encountered by schools, the quality learning circle model did not offer a programme of work to be followed from A to Z. The role of the quality learning circle was to let the group decide on the route and destination. This meant that if the researcher determined the destination, the teachers in the group would expect to be 'spoon fed'. Instead the aim was to trace the journey of the group in whichever direction(s) it took and then analyse the reasons for the route and its particular landmarks. This would then highlight factors which either helped or hindered the individual and combined journeys of these eight teachers. As a feature of the journey, this tension between the teachers wanting a structure and the researcher resisting leadership played an important part of the storming stage of team development. During this stage there was a need to clarify the expectations of the study, the amount of work required of each of the teachers, a structure and some idea of an outcome. Diane's words echoed the feelings of the group when she said:

"I like something structured. I want to know what is happening. I like to know why we're going there, what the purpose is and sort of basically what I then know I'll be getting out of it.... I have to know exactly where to go and it will get done!"

Fullan's (1999) acknowledgement that learning occurs on the edge of chaos is somewhat comforting when trying to maintain the delicate balance between too much and too little structure. He argues that the old way of managing change, appropriate in more stable times, no longer works. Instead he finds it helpful to consider two different theories: complexity or chaos theory and evolutionary theory. He describes complexity theory as:

"The link between cause and effect is difficult to trace, that change (planned and otherwise) unfolds in non-linear ways, that paradoxes and contradictions abound and that creative solutions arise out of interaction under conditions of uncertainty, diversity and instability".

It is interesting that the teachers in the study had initial concerns which relate closely to this theory. The teachers were worried about lack of structure, embarking on a journey without a set route and destinations and uncertainty of their learning.

As their task was to become more familiar with the assessment strategies in the NEMP reports, it was like opening Pandora's Box. On seeing how much the 'box' contained, they became somewhat overwhelmed with the enormity of the task. Diane again said:

"It was just the content that we were using that I couldn't get my hands around.... It was a huge thing because I didn't know where to start. There were six books in front of me and I thought, 'oh no'. I don't know whether I should be doing something that I liked doing, like say reading, or pick something like technology which I don't even want to go into because that would expand me more. The picture was just too big".
What they had yet to realise was that the challenge of this diversity, uncertainty and instability would in fact be a very satisfying learning journey. A pattern was then adopted for subsequent meetings and this eased the pain of uncertainty. It followed the format of:

- a sharing of any trialing of the NEMP tasks since the last meeting
- the researcher going through a report with a synopsis highlighting the variety of tasks and assessment strategies
- the group commenting on either the implications for future classroom practice or links with the past (e.g., curriculum integration, units of work, suitability for various age and interest groups)
- establishing the report to be discussed at the next meeting
- a commitment to share any trialing from the report discussed or other reports at the next meeting.

The other theory mentioned by Fullan (1999) is evolutionary theory. He writes:

"while complexity theory is about learning and adapting under unstable and uncertain conditions, evolutionary theory of relationships raises the questions of how humans evolve over time, especially in relation to interaction and co-operative behaviour".

This theory provides a useful framework for the quality learning circles approach. The group moved through various stages whereby the eight teachers were able to share their experiences of trialing the NEMP tasks, take risks, and visit each other in their classrooms. This approach highlighted the role of interactions and co-operative behaviour in learning. At times this was a painful process and not without risks. However, as the group bonded, fear of risks diminished because they found they were learning together and supporting each other. They found the quality learning circle helped them to progress with the task of working through the NEMP reports as well as meeting their own individual and school needs for disseminating ideas on a wider plane.

2 Sharing within the quality learning circle model

As each report was introduced according to the established pattern, the group became familiar with the layout of the reports and how these might be shared with other teachers in their own schools. They began to see the benefit of coming together and sharing their workloads. Lois commented:

"I probably wouldn't have done anything as in-depth on my own. It has been a focus and definitely made me look at the exemplars and think, which ones I could use. I wouldn't have done it without the meetings".

Katrina also felt she had benefited from the group focus. She maintained:

"If I'd just had the reports sitting on my desk, I wouldn't have done any more than dipped. Because you had gone through them and summarised them, (which makes it a lot easier), and focussed our attention on a different one each time, I've made a point of using them in the classroom and selling them to other teachers. So they've now become a useful part of my programme, rather than an extra dumped on top of everything else".

Classroom application was very important to these teachers. As the amount of trialing increased, then more and more of the meeting time was devoted to sharing time. These teachers were increasingly directing their own learning and becoming less dependent on the
researcher to facilitate the meetings. In fact the researcher's role was often one of ensuring that the agenda was being covered. Diane made this comment about sharing saying:

"I think being able to share with each other the things we were doing. It has prodded us onto, 'oh, that looks alright. Oh I think I can handle that one' and I'll have a go at it, you know? I think they've developed into a style that's functional and effective".

Katrina mentioned the fortnightly spacing of the meetings and the momentum gathered. She said:

"When you know you have another meeting coming, you think, oh I must remember to do something for that, so you get the books out. So they've actually encouraged me to use them, because the others, and you, expect something at each of the meetings. And I suppose in all fairness, it's not fair of me to have my Wednesday meetings unless I have done preparation or follow up... I look forward to seeing everybody and seeing how they've gone on the tasks. I look forward to what we are doing next and I'm always enthused when I go away to try some of the activities".

The need for teachers to regularly talk about their practice with interested others was clearly an important feature of the quality learning circle as is the case for a learning community. These teachers loved talking to each other and once they started it was often hard to interrupt! Since the development of collegiality in schools is closely aligned with teacher talk, the words of Judith Warren Little (1981) are appropriate.

She writes that collegiality depends on the presence of four specific behaviours in schools. By coincidence, each of these features is common to the quality learning circle approach, even the classroom visits which have yet to be discussed. These are:

1. that adults in schools talk about practice. These conversations are frequent, continuous, concrete and precise
2. adults observe each other engaged in the practice of teaching and administration. These observations become the practice to reflect on and talk about.
3. adults engage together in work on curriculum by planning, designing, researching and evaluating curriculum
4. adults teach each other what they know about teaching, learning and leading. Craft knowledge is revealed, articulated and shared.

When comparing the quality learning circle to teacher talk in their own schools, several comments were offered. Mary said:

"I like actually, professional rapport with other people and I think the difficulty sometimes is discussing some things that others aren't interested in, whereas here, we all have a common focus".

All of the teachers felt that they were better able to reflect on their practice outside of their school environment. Katrina spoke about her realisation of a personal need to bounce ideas off somebody else and the value of looking at other people's styles in order to understand her own. Lois who worked in the largest of all the schools, said:

"As teachers we need time to reflect and this situation with the QLC is perfect in that it is away from school... It's people who have similar interests
or experience... It's actual time to talk to other people about what we do. And as a teacher, I don't feel I do enough of that perhaps in this school. I do have other people in the community I ring and say... I want to discuss...".

Mavis had described her experience of school professional development as spoon feeding. For her the QLC model was quite different. She explained this as:

"Here (in the QLC) we are having to do an equal amount to bring to it because we are all helping each other... I think the QLC is good in the fact that we are feeling we have some sort of ownership in it".

3 School visits

After a term of meetings, the teachers were ready to exchange classroom visits. These like the model of quality learning circles, had needed some discussion before the teachers felt comfortable with the idea of an observer in their classrooms. Time was needed for the teachers to feel comfortable in each other's presence before this aspect of the model was introduced. They needed to reach a certain level of confidence with their NEMP work to welcome the visit of a colleague.

At about this time, the teachers had access to some of the NEMP resources eg video extracts, card equipment, and photographs. These provided a real incentive for trialing and again marked a turning point in the NEMP journeys. Katrina said:

"Well having the gear has helped. You know as soon as we got our packs of gear, I could try activities that I couldn't try without it... Before I was picking out activities that I could adapt to worksheet or teacher talking stuff. As soon as I got the equipment, I could try different activities... Also when we went to other schools, we could try tasks that could be taken with a smaller group and we divided the class into three groups of ten".

This arrival of the resources took some of the pressure of teacher preparation away from these teachers. It also answered their initial dilemmas about whole class manageability with NEMP activities because they could involve the other teacher in a meaningful way rather than have them observing. The teachers then had a most interesting time trialing the various activities across age groups and schools getting an idea of how their children related to those at other schools. Suddenly when one person spoke about using a particular activity the other teachers wanted to try it even though it might not fit alongside their particular classroom themes of the moment. Here was movement over the threshold and a willingness to give anything a try. Any earlier caution disappeared and real learning was occurring now that risk taking was accepted.

Most of the teachers had four exchanges of such visits where they visited someone else or had another person visit them. These experiences were valued as it was a rare chance to go beyond their own school gates. They tended to use the time to take advantage of an extra pair of hands in the room and divide the class into groups for station activities. Then time was spent in discussion of the class, individual children and the success of the activities used. Comparisons were possible across the schools as several teachers repeated the same activities.

4 Dissemination of NEMP within own schools

Each of the teachers felt that they wanted to share their newly gained knowledge about NEMP back in their schools. This proved to be a challenging task as the staff development
programmes were already full and teachers had no other meeting slots. These teachers did not want to give written material to teachers. Instead their preference was to demonstrate the potential of the NEMP reports in practical ways with the NEMP resources and samples of children's work.

It was interesting to watch the approaches adopted by each of the teachers as they attempted to familiarise their staff with the NEMP reports. Katrina and Diane were able to 'drip feed' information after each meeting. Diane for example, found out who was doing particular units of work and then rushed to each teacher with a bag of NEMP resources. She felt that in order to 'hook' the teachers, she needed to make it easy for them and provided typed sheets all ready for use. Lois, Sarah and Harriet were syndicate leaders and could make time in meetings to share their latest trialing. Mary and Mavis on the other hand waited a considerable time before space was made available in a staff meeting and carefully timed the meeting to coincide with the release of the latest NEMP reports. They were so successful that their staffs wanted further sessions. Lara had participated for her personal benefit and as a part time teacher did not have the same opportunities to share information with staff.

Now the challenge for these teachers is to take teachers in their own schools on NEMP journeys in ways which will both disseminate the NEMP reports at the classroom level and empower teachers to use the information to benefit teaching and learning. The test for the quality learning circles model will be to see if it can indeed contribute to the development of sustained collaborative learning teams amongst teachers in the same school.

Key features of the QLC model are captured by Katrina's unsolicited verse marking the end of the QLC meetings. These words highlight the stages of the group's development from the initial coaxing of the teachers to join and participate, through its storming stage where it fought for a structure and norms for operating, its bonding and finally reaching a level of confidence and knowledge about the scope of the NEMP reports and activities.

Says Susan

Come and learn about assessment

Lots of wondrous things to do,

Play with all the NEMP equipment

Fun for me and you...

Says Susan.

Alternate Wednesdays College bound

Leaving time to park the car

All new faces, schools and ages

Time to start work now...

Says Susan.

And off to schools to try the tests
Different classes and places to see

Back to College to talk it through

Yummy, scrummy afternoon tea...

Says Susan.

Our numbers did swell and swell and swell
And the rest of us thought, "glad it's not me"

Babies and NEMP, what's the connection

Maybe it's because we're all so happy...

Says Susan.

So thanks for the learnings, the chats
And the sharing.

We go on enthused and enriched and well fed,

And to Susan, our mentor, our teacher and friend

This is one garden path up which we were happily led...

Says us all.

Conclusion

In summary, some of Fullan's (1999) latest lessons to understand change provide links to the journeys of the eight teachers in this research study. These acknowledge the need for a theoretical base to guide the work of change agents, a recognition of the anxiety it may invoke and the need for a collaborative problem solving approach. In combination these guidelines have a better chance of meeting needs and completing the task. Evans' (1996) reminder about the complexity of change serves as a warning for those leading or embarking on change journeys:

"change offers growth and progress but it also stirs fear because it challenges competence and power, creates confusion and conflict and risks the loss of continuity and meaning".

However the real challenge for teachers is offered by Barth (1991), who writes:

"Learning is not something like chicken pox, a childhood disease that makes you itch for a while and then leaves you immune for the rest of your life".
If this is our challenge then we need to be more creative in finding ways to demonstrate that change can be exciting, stimulating and lead to improvements.

Bibliography


