ABSTRACT:

The Quality Teacher Program (QTP) recently introduced by the Commonwealth Government is a three year program that provides funding to strengthen the skills and understanding of those in the teaching profession.

In Victoria, The Association of Independent Schools of Victoria (AISV) in response to this initiative, has developed a project entitled ‘School-based Teacher Renewal’ involving three independent sector specific strategies and one cross-sectoral strategy.

One of these strategies, ‘Teacher Renewal Through Partnerships’ is a strategy which focuses on schools establishing a teacher renewal coordinating team being assisted by a university facilitator to address issues of teacher renewal. Schools were required to develop a Quality Teacher Strategic Plan associated with target curriculum area/s. Integral to this strategy is the provision of an external facilitator to support the teacher renewal coordinating team in each school.

Approximately 46 academic staff from Faculties of Education at Deakin University and The University of Melbourne are working in partnership with AISV across 50 schools on this three year project.

This project builds on successful teacher professional development outcomes learned from the previous Commonwealth project, the Innovative Links Between Universities and Schools under the National Professional Development Program (NPDP) from 1994 to 1996.

This paper, presented by the Project Directors from Melbourne University and Deakin University will describe outcomes of the ‘Teacher Renewal Through Partnerships’ program and discuss findings gathered from experiences to date of those involved in this partnership program.

INTRODUCTION:

The Quality Teacher Program (QTP) recently introduced by the Commonwealth Government is a three year program that provides funding to strengthen the skills and understanding of those in the teaching profession.

In Victoria, The Association of Independent Schools of Victoria (AISV) in response to this initiative, has developed a project entitled ‘School-based Teacher Renewal’ involving three independent sector specific strategies and one cross-sectoral strategy.

One of these strategies, ‘Teacher Renewal Through Partnerships’ is a strategy which focuses on schools establishing a teacher renewal coordinating team being assisted by a university facilitator to address issues of teacher renewal. Schools were required to develop a Quality Teacher Strategic Plan associated with target curriculum area/s. Integral to this strategy is the provision of an external facilitator to support the teacher renewal coordinating team in each school. Academic staff from two universities were involved as facilitators.
In this paper we focus on the role of the facilitator in the process of change in a teacher renewal program. Data is drawn from a variety of sources –

(i) discussions at group meetings,

Throughout the year university staff met regularly as separate university groups and on two occasions both university groups met together.

(ii) facilitator progress reports,

Facilitators had to provide regular written reports and on one occasion, were asked to provide a ‘snapshot’ from their experience in the project to date that would illustrate a key learning about the change process and/or their role as facilitator.

(iii) a research project,

In this project previous research on the role of the facilitator was used as a framework to develop a series of questions related to this role in order to examine how participation in this present program has increased our understanding of the role. Six facilitators were interviewed in depth.

We use this data to develop a series of key learnings based on our experiences in the project to date. The voices throughout this paper are those of the university facilitators.

DISCUSSION:

To facilitate means to make things easy or easier. The educator/leader as facilitator makes the process of teamwork easier by fostering collective effort, encouraging group problem-solving, managing interpersonal conflict, and building a framework for learning, based on participative decision-making and the group’s stated goals

Based on Robert Quinn’s Prism 3, Competing Values


Recent research on successful school based reform refers to the importance of the collective problem solving capacity of school staff (Fullan 1993; Darling-Hammond and Sikes 1999). Darling-Hammond and Sikes (1999) writes about the development of sustainable professional communities within and across schools and how this development is essential for supporting teachers’ growth and development. Additionally, this research indicates how crucial teachers’ knowledge, beliefs and classroom practices are and that long term professional development needs to be based on teachers’ practice as well as research (Darling-Hammond and Sikes 1999).

Research also indicates that external agents can play important catalytic roles in introducing new ideas to teachers, helping form professional communities and facilitating the process that supports teachers through periods of professional learning and extended processes of change (Fullan 1993, 1999; Darling-Hammond and Sikes 1999). Fullan’s (1993, 1999) work
on change processes also indicates that collaboration, learning in groups and working together with a commitment to the greater good is crucial.

1. UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

Fullan (1991) writes about the complexity of change and the lessons necessary for change to be effective. In particular, and bearing on this project, he notes that theories of change and theories of education need each other, that conflict and diversity are necessary, that we need to understand the meaning of operating on the edge of chaos, that collaborative cultures are anxiety provoking and anxiety containing and that there is no single solution. Each partnership project needs to craft their own theories and actions by being a critical analyst and critical consumer.

Facilitators note the need to recognise that a process of change is not linear nor predictable. There are various stages and states of change.

In the beginning things were solid, the project application had been written, the job had been planned. Then the project had to get started, how do we do it? Who is involved? What does the project really mean? – the process becomes fluid. The project moves in and out of these perspectives.

Some facilitators tried very different strategies to assist the process of change for and with the teachers.

I tried to get the teachers to use an Action Planner - but I filled it out for them during the small team consultations. I tried to get them to write in a Professional Challenge Notebook - just one page with some sentence completions - but they only did this when I was due for a consultation on progress (like doing their homework for the teacher). However, I do think these two strategies - and also being up-front about the change process itself in a mini-PD - did help keep a sense of progress happening.

2. UNDERSTANDING THAT UNCERTAINTY IS PART OF THE INITIAL PROCESS OF CHANGE

Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) advocate that crucial to any planning of educational change through professional development is an understanding of the context or ecology of teachers' working environment. They believe

"Change is too often idealized; thought of in self-contained systems and packaged too neatly. It needs to be dealt with in ways that are much more sensitive to the real world demands of the context of teaching."

(Fullan and Hargreaves, 1991, p.31)

The work environment for teachers is changeable. What may work for one teacher may not work for another. What may be effective for one group of learners may be less effective for another. What may be successful this week might prove a failure next week.
Being prepared for and accommodating this type of uncertainty in the initial stages of a project helps move the project forward.

Although it was outside the control of AISV and university facilitators, there was some delay between schools’ initial applications to be involved in the project and the commencement of the program. In some cases, staff who wrote the initial application were no longer with the school or had not communicated the intent of the application to the school renewal team.

For some school renewal teams in the initial stages of the project there was uncertainty about the project itself and particularly about the role of the facilitator.

Initially the team and myself were unsure of expectations. An informal gathering beforehand may have helped build a relationship before the ‘time allocation’ started ticking. At this meeting the expectations could have been clarified to avoid confusion.

It was very unclear to the school, and to me, what exactly my role was to be at the start of the year. I almost felt that I was forcing myself on the co-ordinating team at first (for the first two meetings). However, once trust and my credibility was established we were able to move forward and the small team consultations seemed to work well as a prodder of action and reflection. This was the first time I have worked with a school when I have not been specifically invited for my expertise and it was hard to try and establish credibility and a sense of shared direction. I felt that the school team thought I was a checker on their progress at first - rather than a supporter/facilitator.

A lack of clarity of roles and expectations meant that we were all a bit "wary" for first semester. I think that we should have had a common PD day across all the teachers (or at least the co-ordinating teams) and facilitators where we were up-front about the nature of the change process itself and what our roles might be (we could figure them out on the day). With the AISV meetings kept separate it was hard to feel we were all part of one exciting project.

[There was a] lack of clarity about the role of the facilitator and the expectations about the nature of the relationship between the TRTP team and the facilitator. [The school] was unclear about how to operate with a 'critical friend'.

3. ALLOWING THOSE INVOLVED TO TAKE RISKS TO COPE WITH UNCERTAINTY

Effecting change through professional development programs is dependent on teachers being the centre of those programs and feeling a sense of ownership of the process. In order to support the uncertainty that is part of any change program, the facilitator must spend time building confidence and trust between him/herself and the renewal team. A facilitator must have the ability to build a partnership of trust and credibility.

You have to take the time to build up trust. And you have to appear credible. You have to show the group that their ideas are valued. This takes time, it doesn’t just happen. You have to work on it.
Johnson et al (1999) in their collaborative research with Australian schools experienced similar results. They found "the quality of … interactions with teachers was inhibited, at least initially, by the need to establish … credibility in the schools" (p. 130). These researchers, like the facilitators in this study, presented their credentials "in ways that confirmed our familiarity with and appreciation of school life" (p. 130).

We had to be adaptable. The difficulty always was to make the program a priority for the school when it was competing with other high priorities.

The implementation of this project relied on two key features: people and planning. The success of the project highlighted the importance of teachers committed to self-improve their practice and willingness to take risks for student engagement and curriculum improvement.

4. KNOWING ABOUT SCHOOL ORGANISATION

Organisational conditions within the school make it more or less likely that change will be successful. The first area of knowledge for a facilitator is to have an understanding of school cultures, organisational structures and the various forms of leadership working in schools. It is important to understand the role that senior management holds in supporting or legitimising change.

The structure of big schools needs to be understood,

In large schools there are lots of things happening, lots of projects going on. They didn’t know what to do with me, where I would fit in. They didn’t know what to do with a facilitator and I wasn’t sure of my role either. Its hard to move in an already established power hierarchy that’s built on personalities. Its hard for this sort of project to fit in too.

Some schools are small and have a curriculum that reflects a particular theoretical perspective,

If you’re working in a small school, especially a small specialist school your credibility is linked to the school’s acceptance of you and the projects worth. You need to have the "stamp" of the specialism.

Knowing about the broader organisation of schools in the independent system also helps the facilitator to be more effective.

5. KNOWING ABOUT THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF SCHOOLS

Facilitators need to acknowledge that significant reform will not come about if the emotional side of teachers’ work is ignored (Hargreaves, 1997). Facilitators need to understand something about how teachers feel and experience their work in schools. To make further demands on teachers, who already feel over-worked, may be counter-productive. Facilitators needed to show empathy for teachers and accept that they legitimately feel overworked.

This issue of schools as organisations working within particular social contexts needs to be carefully taken account of in this project. Sensitivities to different values and belief systems, different school histories and traditions and broad contextual issues need to be considered.
in the process of change. Gray (1988, p.12) notes that those working with schools must "be able to understand special cultural characteristics" and to be "able to balance the general with the particular" of schools. One facilitator raised a number of questions in regards to this,

Did the 'vision' for the QTP have organisational commitment at the school? Was there a clear, coherent strategy within the school or did it rely on the efforts of a few individuals? Did the QTP have the support of administrators and other leading teachers?

Knowledge is also needed about the way school work and the nature of the complex power relationships in the school.

It was essential to stay in touch with the principal and endeavour to ensure that the expectations of the staff, the principal and the QTP facilitator were congruent. Not a simple task sometimes.

It is important for facilitators to understand the complex cultural and social context of schools and the ways the different schools work. Staff morale and staff confidence are issues that are integral to the effective working of schools. One facilitator wrote about the highlight of the project from her perspective.

On the last day of term the staff were actively involved in the implementation of a PD session for the rest of the staff. The session began with me summarizing the aims, doing a quick 'tuning in' activity and then the 13 teachers planned and led activities with small groups similar to those used on the PD day. They also presented their student products to staff and answered questions about how this worked in practice. It was terrific for confidence building and as an overall staff morale boosting session.

6. TIME

Brown (1988, p26) reminds us that "finding that there never seems to be enough time is a common experience for nearly everyone ………. Innovation generally requires more effort than simply maintaining the status quo". QTP is a long term program. Inherent in this model are both strengths and weaknesses.

A further strategy that is being used productively concerns making effective use of the allocated time for the Quality Teacher Program. There has been a significant cultural change over the course of the program. The open conversations have led to a shared commitment to the goals of the program that has become stronger over time.

Long term programs are more effective in bringing about change that becomes part of the life of the school. However busy teachers often want to see projects completed as soon as possible.

Concerns - The busyness of the school and the fact that this is one project among many - there has not been a sense of urgency about this.

Over the length of this program, staff may leave the school, new staff may enter. This will alter the dynamics of the process and has to be accommodated for.
It was disappointing that two of the original renewal team members discontinued their involvement because of other commitments.

The facilitator must help teachers work on strategies of time management, setting priorities and setting a series of small achievable measurable goals.

Some facilitators commented on the tension in setting up meetings for the team.

[This school] is a multi-campus college. It has a junior campus, a year nine campus and a senior campus. It is often difficult to coordinate meetings with staff across all campuses.

The nature of schools and the general 'busyness' of staff makes it difficulty for teacher renewal to go on without establishing a regular pattern of meetings.

Timetabling became a real issue.

Time constraints in the school. Simple timetabling issues prevented meetings taking place.

Getting the same people to each meeting was often problematic. Many schools had difficulty releasing their teachers so that meeting could take place. Small schools reported difficulty finding replacement staff. Some schools commented that the funding for teacher release was not sufficient. Some schools appeared not to use the teacher release funding. Some teachers felt negligent if they had to leave classes to someone else.

Given the difficulties in actually organising meetings at the College, telephoning me and arranging with me was probably just another level of frustration for them.

Johnson, Peters and Williams (1999) reported a similar situation. They found that although schools had been allocated funding for release time, it was often unused. The teachers in their study were uncomfortable about being absent from classes or other programs or special activities going on in the school.

7. TENSION BETWEEN ROLE OF CONSULTANT AND FACILITATOR

This project has highlighted the tension between the role of the facilitator and that of the consultant. Part of the difficulty in the initial stages of the program was the lack of clear understanding as to the role of the facilitator. In the initial stages of the program AISV had outlined the role to both the facilitators and to the schools.

Integral to this strategy is the provision of an external facilitator to support the teacher renewal coordinating team by:

Regularly meeting with the team

Acting as a "critical friend" and "sounding board"

Providing advice on change management issues

Guiding and informing progress with content and process
Acting as a mentor

Providing resource suggestions

Participating schools will be grouped into local area networks (LANs) to meet regularly to share and monitor process and progress.

(AISV Introductory Material)

Nevertheless this project clearly demonstrated that experience is the best teacher. Some schools were familiar with the role of the outsider as consultant. Most schools had not participated in projects with a facilitator. Many university staff had been involved in this role in their work with schools. Some had not.

Initially they wanted me to be a consultant and to tell them what to do and how to do it. I had to wait for them to find out what they wanted to do. I shared information and ideas. Then after a long time one quiet teacher shared with the group a critique of her teaching. She talked in front of her peers, she owned the change.

Facilitators report that their role involves an asymmetrical power relationship. Schools have expectations of who they think university academics are and what they can and cannot do. Facilitators must work on ways to overcome or share power so that power and cultural differences be appropriately managed.

I felt the project co-ordinator was testing me out against her perception of who she thought I was and who she thought I should be. She asked me for my CV. I think she wanted me to be an evaluator not a facilitator. She wanted me to fit in with her perception of a hierarchy of power.

However acting as a facilitator does not mean that you are without expertise in appropriate areas.

Even though we are not acting as consultants in this project its still important to know things. It was satisfying when I was able to recommend a certain specialists and that person was effective and the group reported back their satisfaction.

For many schools, consultancy is a more familiar role and appears easier to accommodate. The facilitator, in working to develop ownership by the renewal team, often appear not to be playing a productive role. Discussion in the renewal teams needs to focus on encouraging schools to see strength of the facilitation role in bringing about change. Questions arise such as

Did the 'renewal group' see this as an opportunity or a burden? Were those 'selected' to go to the PD committed to their role as 'change agents'?

'Renewal group' was sensitive to being targeted by the program.

Some academic staff reported experiences that suggest that within this role there is another separation. The role of the facilitor may be to take a more active stance, to be empathetic.
and helpful in facilitating the school’s handling of their project. However the role of the critical friend may be less interventionists and less responsible, there to listen and watch and to ask questions, more suited to the long term. Brown (1988) discusses this distinction when clarifying the role of the ‘outsider’. Whilst the distinction may exist, Brown (1988, p.56) asserts that "the dividing line between critical friend and facilitator is ill defined". One facilitator focused on her role as a critical friend within the change process.

A 'critical friend' does not set the agenda. I can be assertive, but I cannot demand that meetings be held and that others attend them. A critical friend should respond, not determine. My role was not to nag and pester, only to guide and mentor. The 'critical friend' role is only effective if everyone is focused enough to enter into that sort of dialogue.

There appears to be attributes related to the facilitators role that are consistent across all school organisations and cultures. Among these attributes are good communication skills and persistence.

Schools are different, we have to know that and the way we might approach groups in schools may be different, but the skills and attributes of a facilitator consistent – to listen, to give feedback, helping to see project in do-able stages, to suggest the next step ..........

It takes a long time. You spend time with groups, nothing seems to be happening, things take so long to get started, and you’re going along. And then the light goes on and someone ‘gets it’ and you don’t even know what you did. But something has happened, change has happened.

Facilitators report that a key focus in the work they do with school groups is to bridge the gap between theory and teachers’ practice. Other facilitators referred to rhetoric and reality disparity.

I think part of a facilitators role is to bridge the gap between rhetoric and reality, to help the group overcome a sense of isolation about professional development. Its important to encourage and support the view of teachers as learners.

This lack of experience and understanding about the role of the facilitator is echoed by some facilitators who report that they are unsure that their part in the school’s renewal project is seen as valuable or effective. They are unsure whether they have been seen by the schools (or even themselves) to have added value to the project.

I think a very important aspect of this project is the evaluation of the facilitator. If the TRTP committee was provided with a criteria for evaluating the facilitator perhaps both parties would have a clearer idea of what was expected. What would the TRTP committee at the school say about my contribution to the QTP? Not much, I’m disappointed to say.
8. PROVIDING SPACE THAT IS CREDIBLE AND LEGITIMATE

Not all collaborative partnerships can overcome the institutional and cultural perception of the role of the university facilitator (as noted above) that may be held by some teachers in schools. These expectations involve an asymmetrical power relationship but as Hayes and Kelly (2000, p. 469) note:

*The question, then, is not how to overcome or share power in an effort to adhere to some utopian vision of equitable collaboration, but how power and cultural differences be appropriately managed so that a fruitful and productive space can be carved for individuals to work together within a shared vision.*

The perception held by schools is that they are very busy places and programs such as this are sometimes seen as additional to, rather than integrated into, normal school operations. Thus part of the role of the effective facilitator is to create for the teachers involved, a space for discussion, reflection and challenge and that this space allows for the legitimisation of their renewal as teachers.

*One very significant role of a facilitator is to give the group space – space to think, to talk, to share, to plan. And its important to make sure that that space is seen as important, as legitimate professional development.*

Teachers themselves need to see that meeting together is important. Senior management must also be clear about this and be encouraged to ensure that professional time is provided and is supported as being purposeful. The literature on teacher change points clearly to the vital importance of the support from school leadership if change is to be effective (Fullan, 1991; Standards Council of the Teaching Profession, 1996). Fullan (1991, p. 76) emphasises the importance of legitimising change,

*All major research on innovation and school effectiveness shows that the principal strongly influences the likelihood of change, but it also indicates that most principals do not play instructional or change leadership roles…. Principal’s actions serve to legitimate whether a change is to be taken seriously (and not all changes are) and to support teachers both psychologically and with resources.*

Facilitators reported that they felt that they had done this aspect of their role less well. Combined with the previous issue of time, often teachers did not see the importance of spending time together nor were they given overt support by senior management.

*an issue that the team is confronting concerns school structures i.e. creating flexibility in the timetable to support the principles of curriculum integration and reorganisation of teachers’ work i.e. working in teams.*

9. RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Those involved in this project perceive its focus on teacher renewal in a positive way. Information from AISV indicates that schools have not reported any perception of this project being built on a deficit model of professional development as it has often been in the
past. However some areas of renewal are more difficult for teachers to move into. Information technology appears to be one of these.

I think that while we could say that teachers are moving away from a deficit model of professional development, that is they are seeing teacher renewal as a positive thing that they have control over – information technology is different. It's seen as newer and harder. A teacher said “next year I'm really going to get involved – when I have more time”. Another said “I'm really excited about computers in the classroom – I'm going to think about what to do soon”. But underneath there is a real level of fear. Perhaps the notion of who is the professional here is threatened.

An issue that will be explored by the facilitators in the next stage of the program will be the way that they can help the school groups direct the change process. Many school groups see the importance of, and have experience with, curriculum renewal, they are less sure of the process of change as it relates to teacher renewal.

It's important to try to get the group to talk about process. It seems easier for teachers to talk about content. They have to be supported to debate the strengths and weaknesses of the change process. If these seem hard at the start perhaps that can be done at the end – let's all go away and do it our own way and we'll talk about it at the end.

10. HOW TO MEASURE CHANGE

Reports from facilitators give limited information about how the change process is documented and how change is measured. However some facilitators have encouraged teachers to keep, for example, reflective journals as a way of documenting change. This has shown to be a powerful strategy for teachers. Again this is something that all facilitators could focus on as part of their role.

Producing a product (for example a journal) may not only serve as a document from which to draw data to measure change. A product may also serve as tangible evidence of the facilitators' involvement.

I sat back and listened a lot. The group were wanting to work out how best to use consultant's input. I could have said my bit at the beginning, but I waited until they were ready to see how my advice might fit their needs – that way they 'owned' the solution. But I felt I had not done much – then I suggested we produce a paper showing what had been done, why and when. This was really important – the group (and I) could see the evidence of my involvement.

CONCLUSION:

A series of recommendations from a facilitator

Recommendations for the future I would like to see the meeting run by AISV at which all parties are present - AISV, the schools and the facilitator pool. The meeting could then focus on: the role of the facilitator as outlined above the expectations of the School in clarifying
the domain of the project, the timelines for completion, the
establishing of a collaborative team that is to be constant and focused,
and the process of withdrawal from / deferment of the project so that
neither schools or facilitators are left wondering what has gone wrong!
(This would recognise the fact that schools may have emerging
priorities not envisaged at the start), the presentation of an action
research cycle model for implementing change. This would ground the
project as a form of meaningful change, and differentiate the project
from the Professional Development model, which, I suspect, is how a
number of schools have understandably seen the project.

A final comment from a facilitator

I was very impressed and excited by the way all teachers involved
embraced change. While there was minimal initial reluctance, this was
dispersed after teachers trialed strategies in their classrooms. The
positive student responses and teacher support through the informal
meetings helped facilitate the process.

Facilitators report that the role is complex, often uncertain and requires an understanding of
schools, their cultures and the school's previous experiences in professional development
programs. The role requires skills appropriate for change that is a process not an event and
that are both particular to an individual school and its renewal team and universal in enabling
change to take place.

The facilitators from Deakin University and the University of Melbourne indicate a positive
and enthusiastic approach to the project overall. They tend to see it as having important
implications for educational practice particularly in terms of favourable student learning
responses and a new way forward for education in the school and community. It also links
well with the OECD report that states,

Good teachers are good learners and the ultimate test of the success
or failure of policies [and programs for] … professional development
will be their effects on learning outcomes for students’ (OECD 1998).
References:


