

Holding a Mirror to Professional Learning

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**Susan Groundwater-Smith, Centre for Practitioner Research, University of Sydney
Nicole Mockler, Loreto Normanhurst/University of Sydney**

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the ways in which professional learning groups in schools can contribute to whole school improvement. It discusses two sites in which there has been a review of the evidence that has been collected at the school or through the literature over time in order to explore the implications for the continuing improvement of teaching and learning. It has long been argued that there are links between school-wide development, staff development and classroom development for improvement to occur. In these studies, all three elements have been present. The paper discusses the strategies adopted for the creation of professional learning groups across the schools where those groups are structured in such a way that they are founded upon learning that is evidence-based, visible and collaborative, and where the agreed purpose has been whole school improvement.

Introduction

The impact of teachers' practices upon student learning outcomes has now been well documented (Darling Hammond, 1996; Cuttance, 1998; Muijs & Reynolds, 2001; Darling Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Rowe 2003). It is the quality of teaching that has the greatest impact upon student learning. However, it can no longer be seen as acceptable that individual "hero" teachers can operate as separate entities within the school. It is essential that those teachers who are identified as having impressive pedagogical practices can and will share these with their colleagues to the advantage of all. Teachers who make a difference have to be models and coaches who will assist others in making a difference also. Rowe, 2003 makes the case for quality teacher recruitment, but the majority of those who are teaching in our schools are already employed and may remain employed for many years. For the whole school to improve and not just individual classes under the tutelage of individual teachers it is essential that the professional learning of teachers is shared and problematised. As Warren Little (2002) has observed:

Research spanning more than two decades point consistently to the potential educational benefits of vigorous collegial communities.... Researchers posit that conditions for improving teaching and learning are strengthened when teachers collectively question ineffective teaching routines, examine new conceptions of teaching and learning, find generative means to acknowledge and respond to difference and conflict and engage actively in supporting professional growth. (p. 917).

This paper will discuss two sites in which the sharing of teachers' work, insights and understandings are seen as critical to whole school improvement and where professional learning groups have been formed as a vehicle to support teacher development. However as Jackson (2003) points out merely sharing is not enough:

Collaboration in itself is not necessarily a particularly virtuous pursuit, other than for its value in creating social cohesion. Collaboration that involves reflection, dialogue and discourse built around information; which leads to creation of institutionally relevant knowledge; and which subsequently translates it into improvement and planned

intervention designs (with and on the behalf of others) is a potent school development and professional learning activity. (p.4)

He continues by advocating that “if students are to learn more, teachers will need to learn more too” (p. 5); a proposition shared with Darling Hammond & McLaughlin (1999). It is our belief that such learning comes about through a number of different processes, some of which go well beyond the school itself. Teacher professional learning is both informed by knowledge building within the school itself, and through knowledge developed by the academy, and even the policies and practices of employing authorities themselves. Thus, we do not deny the value of the well crafted research study that can be used as a touchstone for teacher professional learning in a collegial setting. Cordingley (2001) found that teachers consulted by the Teacher Training Agency in the UK most valued research evidence when it:

- Is collected through genuine partnerships between teachers and researchers.
- Is collected in authentic classroom contexts.
- Derives from rigorous, transparent research methods.
- Makes claims which are backed up by appropriate evidence.
- Is communicated through vivid and detailed classroom studies.
- Is related to improved aspects of teaching and learning that are relevant to them.

Such an example is to be found in the work of Black & Wiliam (1998, 2003) who took the trouble to transport their research on formative assessment into a network of schools leading to the formation of action plans that would enable the teachers to reconceptualise assessment practices in their classrooms. They argued that not only did teachers respond to the expertise that was offered to them, but that they also needed time and a collegial context in which to critically reflect upon and develop their practice (Black & Wiliam, 2003, p. 64). As we shall assert later in this paper, using studies such as these is a critical component of the process of engaging in teacher professional learning within the context of collegial group formation.

Furthermore, we contend that learning groups, which take teacher professional learning beyond the walls of their individual classrooms require careful planning and facilitation (Groundwater-Smith, 1998). The paper, then, discusses the strategies adopted for the creation of professional learning groups across two schools where those groups are structured in such a ways that they are founded upon learning that is evidence-based, visible and collaborative, and where the agreed purpose has been whole school improvement.

The Context for these Cases

Over the past several years studies regarding the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools (Groundwater-Smith, 2001; Groundwater-Smith & Hayes, 2001; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2002a, Mockler, 2002a) the development of evidence based practice within them (Groundwater-Smith & Hunter, 2000; Groundwater-Smith, 2000, Mockler 2001), and the dilemmas experienced by those acting to facilitate practitioner enquiry (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2002b, Mockler 2003) have been presented and published. As well, attention has been paid to particular methodologies that the Coalition has found to be successful (Needham & Groundwater-Smith, 2003; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2003) and the ways in which this work might assist in the formation and transformation of teacher professional identity (Mockler & Sachs 2002).

In effect the Coalition has committed itself to:

- Developing and enhancing the notion of evidence based practice.
- Developing an interactive community of practice using appropriate technologies.
- Making a contribution to a broader professional knowledge base with respect to educational practice.
- Building research capability within and between schools by engaging both teachers and students in the research process.

- Sharing methodologies which are appropriate to practitioner enquiry as a mean of transforming teacher professional learning.

Currently there are nine schools in the Coalition: three Independent Girls' Schools, two Government Girls High Schools, two Government Boys High Schools and two Government Public Schools. They are all in Metropolitan Sydney and are to be found in suburbs to the North, West and East of the CBD. They embrace both wealthy and well provisioned schools and ones that are facing serious socio-economic challenges.

The two schools in the study are both from the Independent sector. One we shall call Independent Girls School, Northern and the other Independent Girls School, Western. Both of these schools were foundation members of the Coalition and have been engaged in evidence based practice that has as its objective ongoing staff development and teacher learning.

Case 1 – Independent Girls' School Northern

The work of Independent Girls' School Northern as a knowledge building school has been well documented over a period of four years, as indicated above. Over the past three years, the school community has been involved in a process of developing, planning for and implementing an integrated holistic approach to learning known as 'Student Growth Plans'. While the program will be implemented in its entirety with Year 7 2004, a number of long-term professional learning strategies and programs have been initiated as a means of supporting teachers in the process.

The 'Student Growth Plans' approach is based on the following ten principles, which were developed collaboratively by teachers in the earliest stages of planning:

- Student Growth Plans are informed by the school's historically stated values and strategy core values. The development of these values in our students is the key aim of Student Growth Plans.
- Student Growth Plans are about holistic and lifelong education – outcomes defined and articulated across all learning areas.
- Flexibility is a key feature of Student Growth Plans, for both students and teachers. Extended blocks of time where students can self-determine and self-regulate their work is an example of this.
- Interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary studies are key elements of Student Growth Plans, helping students to make links in their learning and links between school and life.
- Information and Communication Technology is used a key tool for learning and administration within Student Growth Plans.
- Teacher learning and reflection is an integral part of Student Growth Plans, and this is reflected in the structures which support Student Growth Plans.
- Student Growth Plans are founded upon the recognition of individual differences and valuing of diversity among members of our school community.
- Student Growth Plans feature opportunities for students to work with an adult who acts in an advisor/tutor capacity.
- Student ownership and negotiation of learning programs is a key component of Student Growth Plans.
- Student Growth Plans provide opportunities for authentic and meaningful parent involvement in student learning.

In 2000, the school implemented a professional development initiative known as the 'L5'. It is on this development that this case study will focus. The program was developed in order to give teachers time primarily to develop their information and communication technology skills, particularly those that would enable them to publish to the school's intranet, in the hope of generating more student-centred, technology and information literacy rich tasks and units of work. Each member of the '5' has an allocation of one fifth of a teaching load to engage in the program.

The program is jointly facilitated by the Director of ICT, Director of Professional Learning and the Head of Information Services. Over the four years of its life, the program has provided a range of

professional learning experiences for each of the facilitators as well as the participants, and gradual changes in the way in which it has been run have been made along the way. These changes have been made in response to not only the evaluations completed by the participants and facilitators during and at the conclusion of each year, but also to the cultural changes which have taken place within the school over that time and the increasing technological skill levels of the participants.

In 2000 and 2001, most members of the '5' had a very basic level of technological skills – while competent users of word processing and email, most had only limited experience of using the internet and no experience of web construction and publishing. Consequently, the emphasis during this time was on developing these skills and the focus on pedagogy and learning was largely incidental and provided via the function of the Director of Professional learning and the Head of Information Services acting as 'critical friends' in providing advice and critique of work at the point of need. In the second half of 2001, the school received a small grant through the Australian Commonwealth Government Quality Teacher Program to carry out a practitioner inquiry project focused on ICT and Information Literacy. The L5 formed the project team and worked together as teacher researchers as part of the program. Through having cause to draw on the literature relating to ICT and pedagogy and information literacy, design and conduct research in their classrooms, ponder the data and think more deeply generally about learning and the role of technology, both participants and facilitators felt that their experience had been greatly enhanced, and the decision was taken to put a more even emphasis on technology and pedagogy in subsequent years.

In 2002, the program was organised so that the technology and pedagogy and learning input were fairly evenly matched, although it became apparent in the second half of the year that it was time to change the structure of the program to match this shift in emphasis. The focus on pedagogy and learning related issues had happened during single periods in which all members of the 5 were released, and because of many things – such as the ICT-focused room in which the group met, the urgency with which they were developing their web-based units of work for students and the attempts of those facilitating to draw out the issues which were a current concern for teachers rather than provide them with a unified program for the term or year – the technology still drove the agenda more than was desirable.

In 2003, the program was restructured, repackaged and readvertised to teachers as a new professional development opportunity focused on 'Pedagogy for the Future'. Previous members of the '5' were eligible to reapply, and the new structures of the program were made clear to teachers before applications were invited. In its current form, the L5 program releases each teacher for 4 teaching periods a week. During two periods they work collaboratively with the Director of ICT developing their technology skills and publishing units of student work to the intranet, in ways similar to the previous version of the program. One day a week the team meets for two hours after school, without computers, to participate in a seminar series focused around different aspects and issues related to 'pedagogy for the future'. Throughout the course of the year, they have focused on Constructivism (reading, for example, Piaget, 1971 and Vygotsky, 1997), Information Literacy (reading, for example, Kuhlthau, 1993 and Bruce, 1997), Authentic Assessment (reading, for example, Black & Wiliam, 1998), and 'Education for Critical Consciousness' (reading, for example, Apple, 2001, 2003, Kalantzis & Cope, 2001 and Freire, 1974). Each week the seminar has focused on one or two readings and a number of critical questions which frame the discussion and attempt to relate the theoretical underpinnings to classroom practice.

In its new incarnation, the L5 program has flourished. While it might be claimed that members of the team have developed a smaller quantity of resources than those in previous cohorts, the quality and theoretical underpinnings of those tasks and units of work have clearly been informed by the seminars their creators have participated in. The vigorous conversation and debate characterising of L5 seminars have created a professional learning experience which although

acknowledged by members as challenging and even 'brain draining' at times, have also been seen as a rare opportunity to revisit some of the learning undertaken during initial teacher training which was at the time largely uncontextualised and abstracted.

While evaluations from members of the 2000, 2001 and 2002 cohorts tended to concentrate on the technological aspects of the program, this year's '5' have clearly come to see themselves differently through their participation in the program, and made a very significant step in recasting their professional identity around the notion of 'teacher as learner'. Some extracts from their reflections follow:

I have found the programme helpful in giving me a fuller understanding of modern pedagogy and also in increasing my ICT skills, and how these may be integrated into learning.

The L5 group has been highly collegial and collaborative which has added to the success of the programme for me.

I have been delighted with the opportunity to work collaboratively with my colleagues on learning tasks/ideas.

Obviously my technology skills have improved out of sight, I feel more competent and confident when approaching online tasks and [The Director of ICT] showed us many of his tricks! I thought our workshops with Jenny Little [an external facilitator and ICT consultant] were fantastic.

The readings and discussions that we did on educational and learning philosophy, trends, assessment etc reiterated (and reminded me of) many of the ideas that I have had that relate to teaching and learning. I love looking at new and exciting ways of making learning viable and fun for students.

The readings were important because they formed the tasks that we were developing for our classes through L5.

I have grown as a teacher through L5 just because I have stepped back, looked at the big picture, evaluated how and why I do certain things and then I have attempted to do them even better.

The seminars about pedagogy and integrating technology in innovative ways in the curriculum have empowered me to apply my content knowledge in a variety of ways to cater for individual student differences.

The focus on pedagogies for the future provided fantastic insights and possibilities for teaching and learning. I have found this experience affirming through our discussion of pedagogy in the seminars and our application through utilising innovations in technology.

Through regular journal entries about my response to the readings and our discussions of issues in teaching and learning, I was able to critique my current practice and come to a realisation about the teacher that I am, and the teacher that I aspire to become. I enjoyed the balance of seminars and the practical applications of technology.

The opportunity to work with peers not only with the technology but also in our reading and discussion sessions was one of the most valuable experiences I've ever had in a school. The reading were enriching and I was able to pass on many ideas to my staff and infuse them and our programs with some fresh ideas.

The facilitators shared with us their visions and dreams for the school and the research material and back up readings were not only inspirational but well chosen for our needs at this time. I will be able to refer to that material in the years ahead especially in our transition to [Student Growth Plans].

I have also gained more confidence in my approach to IT. I am still far from being a master but have enough experience to be able to build upon my skills. I have developed a good working relationship with IT staff and feel I can work on with their help from time to time. I have the aim of having our website include a more comprehensive range of educational programs, offerings for students and general information and I am working towards that goal. I am still (and will be for a while to come) working on more specific uses of IT in classroom practice. I plan on setting a time aside next year when I will work on these projects with IT staff and try to carry on the momentum started by my time in L5.

Case 2 – Independent Girls School Western

As has already been indicated, the work of Independent Girls School Western, as a member of the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools for the past three years, has been thoroughly documented and reported upon. A decision was taken at the beginning of 2003 for each Faculty to form what has become known as a Commission of Enquiry to act as a subject-focused learning group to consider evidence based issues related to the improvement of teaching and learning in the given faculty. It was decided, also, to hold a series of Faculty Forums (Years 6 – 12) to review key research findings over recent years and to discuss their implications in terms of ongoing improvement in learning, including both student learning and teacher learning. In this section of the paper we shall focus upon the deliberations of the Faculty Forums as each one was documented with the assistance of the researcher in residence.

Seven faculty forums were conducted: Maths, Science, TAS, Expressive and Performing Arts (Including Music, Drama and Visual Arts), English, HSIE/History, PDH&PE/Languages. Eighty eight staff were involved. Each forum engaged the nominated faculty staff for approximately four hours.

Initially staff were asked to undertake an “assets audit” in which they reflected upon the positive attributes of: students; faculty staff; the school as a community; and, their personal assets. The decision to hold the assets audit was predicated upon the understanding that ranking the research findings would necessarily focus upon areas that required improvement and development, but that this should be undertaken against a background of considering the current strengths of the school. In some ways this can be seen as an alternative to the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis normally undertaken in such contexts. Following the individual completion of each segment there was discussion within the group. Below the results of the forums are reported in terms of both the qualitative and quantitative data that was secured.

Synthesis of Positive Attributes of Students

Engagement

- They are eager and motivated to learn
- They are committed to and focused on their learning.
- They are enthusiastic learners, especially the younger students.
- They are innovative and creative.
- They are self directed and conscientious
- They are multi-talented.
- They are happy to be at school.
- They have a good healthy attitude towards learning and achievement.
- They are easy to challenge and discuss all sorts of things. They can be very passionate which is very rewarding.
- They have an enthusiastic approach to extra-curricular activities.

- They have high expectations and high standards.
- They are generally well rounded.

Adaptability

- They embrace new ideas/projects.
- They show initiative.
- They are open to new ideas and concepts.
- They adapt well and are adept with new technology.
- They are flexible.
- They are resourceful.

Communication

- They are generally articulate and have good communication skills.
- They are willing to engage staff on a more personal level (appropriately).

Confidence

- They are confident.
- They are willing to express views and opinions.
- They have high self esteem.
- “To their learning they bring a ‘barefoot irreverence’¹ that allows them to question, shape and control what is happening. This ‘spunk’ makes them independent workers who are willing to question the ‘status quo’.

Behaviour

- They are open, friendly and good humoured.
- They are racially tolerant
- They are diplomatic.
- They have a strong sense of justice.
- They genuinely have a concern for others (not just peer or year group)
- They appreciate teachers’ efforts to help them.
- They are cooperative with each other and staff.
- They encourage each other.
- They are mature.
- They are easy to teach (“a lot of teacher pleasers”)
- They are forgiving.
- They mostly want to do the “right thing” by each other and the school.
- They are polite and courteous.
- They are interested in holistic development.
- They are well behaved in class and on excursions
- They are willing to please.
- They respect their teachers.
- They are courteous, caring and empathetic.
- They are happy.

Resources – material and human

- They are resource rich
- They are culturally diverse
- They are both multi-cultural and multi-faithed
- They have supportive backgrounds.

Positive Attributes of Staff

Commitment

- They share the same basic goals – all of them want the best for the girls, not just academically, but socially, emotionally, and in some cases spiritually.

¹ Said by the respondent to be a phrase used by Bronowski, J. In the *Ascent of Man*

- They have a commitment to good teaching.
- They have an ongoing desire to improve and take up challenges.
- They are enthusiastic about their subjects and their teaching.
- They are hard working.

Collegiality

- They are willing to share resources, ideas and skills.
- They are supportive of each other.
- They want to work together.
- They are easy to work with and encouraging of each other.
- They are team oriented.
- They are helpful and cooperative
- They are communicative.
- They are willing to acknowledge mistakes and hassles and seek advice.
- They have a sense of humour and are happy with each other.

Adaptability

- They are willing to embrace new ideas.
- They are flexible.
- They are not averse to change.
- They are risk takers.
- They are receptive and innovative in the context of change, “they think on their feet”.
- They have an ability to see the positive in the adverse.

Professional Knowledge and Skill

- They embody a wide range of skills
- They are experts in their chosen field
- They have a richness of experience.)
- They are highly qualified.
- They have a sound academic knowledge of subject matter.
- They are knowledgeable and approachable.
- They are professional.
- They are organised – reports are done on time, they follow procedures and policies.
- They employ sound classroom practices and a variety of strategies.
- Most are technologically “quite good” – “advanced”
- They are reflective.
- They are motivated to learn and discover.
- They are focused on the overall strategy in the school.
- They enjoy good leadership
- (From a Middle School perspective) They can focus on the particular needs of this (MS) age group.
- (From an Independent Learning Centre - ILC perspective) They use the ILC facilities appropriately for their students.

Positive Attributes of The School as a Community

Standard Setting

- The School, overall, has high expectations of both students and teachers.
- It s teachers have the desire and willingness to help the students achieve their goals.
- It is opportunity rich.
- It provides wide learning experiences.
- It provides a whole raft of opportunities for the students; there is something for everyone.
- It lifts the goal posts so there is an attitude of seeking higher and higher goals.
- It seeks excellence.
- Connectedness is valued.

Innovation and Change

- It is innovative and creative.
- It is dynamic.
- It is flexible.
- There is a willingness, across the school, to take risks.
- It is evolving over time.

Professionalism and Professional Growth

- It is supportive of professional development and experimentation.
- It provides scope to develop professionally and branch out.
- It is willing to provide resources.
- Mistakes are allowed.
- It has great support staff.
- There is increasing technological support.

Climate

- It promotes a climate of respect for and of each other.
- It is both an engaging and exhausting place to work.
- It is a very caring and supportive environment for students, staff (and families).
- It has supportive parents who see learning as valuable.
- There is an active involvement of parents as part of the community.
- It is friendly and optimistic.
- It is relaxed.
- It is understanding.
- It has an ability to accept individuality.
- It is diverse.
- It is respected as a community and has a strong sense of community.
- Its camping arrangements bring the school years together.
- Its structured house system develops a sense of caring.
- It is resource rich.

Personal Assets

Teachers were quite hesitant when it came to completing this section of the audit. They were somewhat reluctant to cite their own strengths and capabilities. However, when discussing the item people were keen to point out the assets that individuals brought to the faculty and that enhanced the faculty as a learning group.

Collegiality, Communication & Empathy

- I am understanding, willing to listen and supportive.
- I am easy to work with.
- I am reliable.
- I work well with others but have the ability to be an individual; I think outside the square.
- I am caring.
- I am resourceful.
- I am friendly.
- I have a good sense of humour
- I am supportive of my colleagues.
- I am willing to delegate..
- Students come first, always.
- I have a good relationship with the girls and seek to improve it continually.
- I am happy to share.
- I am a good listener.
- I am patient.
- I enjoy working as a member of a team.
- I have good relational skills.

- I am intelligent.
- I am hardworking.
- I am enthusiastic.
- I am personally motivated and able to motivate students.
- I am a keen learner as well as a teacher.
- I am dedicated.
- I have a strong commitment to (the school).

Professional Knowledge & Skill

- I have sound knowledge of my subject and am well qualified.
- I am passionate about my subject. I love what I teach.
- I have had a range of experience outside the school and outside of teaching.
- I provide a balance of academic expertise with relevance to students' experiences.
- I am becoming more experienced.
- I am well organised
- Prioritising has led to more effective decision making and positive working experiences.
- I have vast experience working in the library (previously in the corporate sector) and especially with the development of technology and the expectations of employers with regard to technology.
- I have a broad perspective. I have taught all age groups/genders for a good number of years.
- I am innovative in my teaching.

Adaptability

- I am generally adaptable
- I am flexible
- I do not see this as a job with a set daily time frame.
- I am open to change and learning.
- I am always seeking 'the better way'.
- I am willing to try new ideas.
- I embrace new ideas.
- I do not get overwhelmed with change and innovation. I identify the strengths and make these the focus.
- I am committed to learning new things.

Ranking Research Evidence

Following the assets audit Faculty staff were asked to take the following findings and rank them from 1 to 8 in terms of the degree of difficulty in making the necessary improvements. Each item was located in terms of the research study (or studies) from which they had emerged. Following the individual rankings, which were forced choice in the sense that there could be "no equal places"; participants engaged in a discussion regarding each item.

Items

1. Clearly stated explicit purposes.
2. Sound structure and organisation.
3. Connection to: prior learning, cross curriculum learning and students' experiences.
4. Authentic forms of assessment.
5. A basis in both teachers' and students' understandings of what has been learned.
6. A fair, safe and mutually respectful learning environment.
7. Intellectually challenging and engaging content.
8. Appropriate and imaginative technological support.

Findings

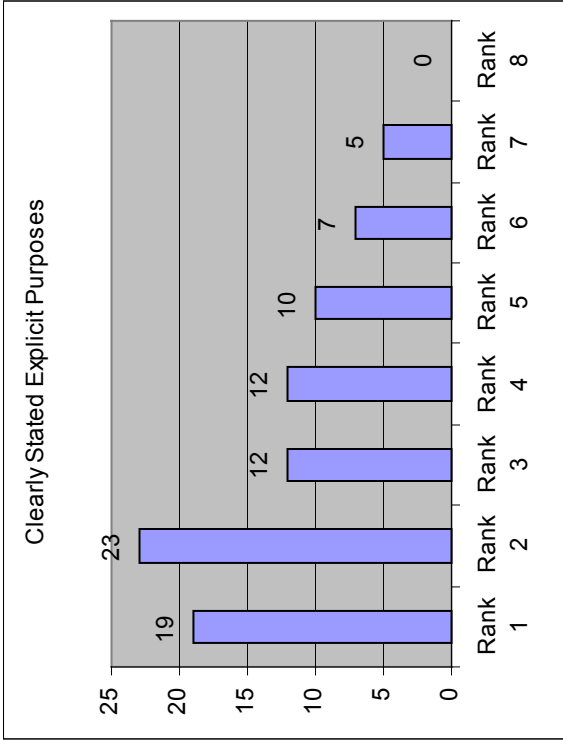


Figure 1

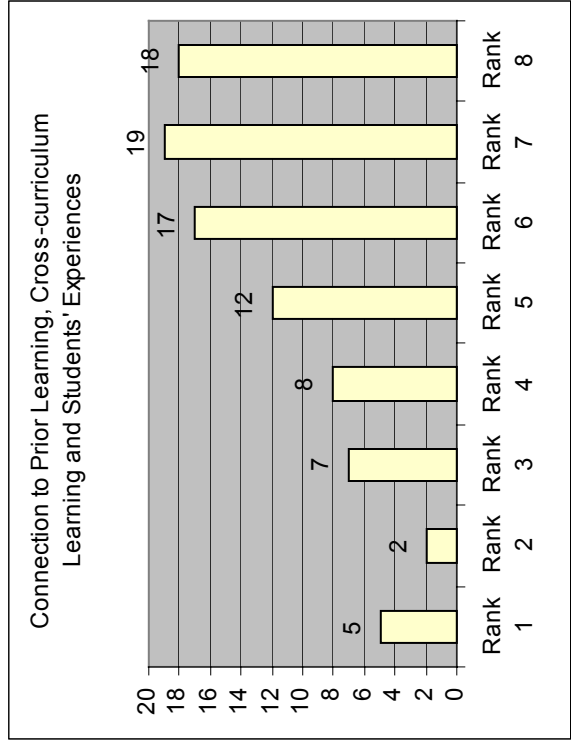


Figure 3

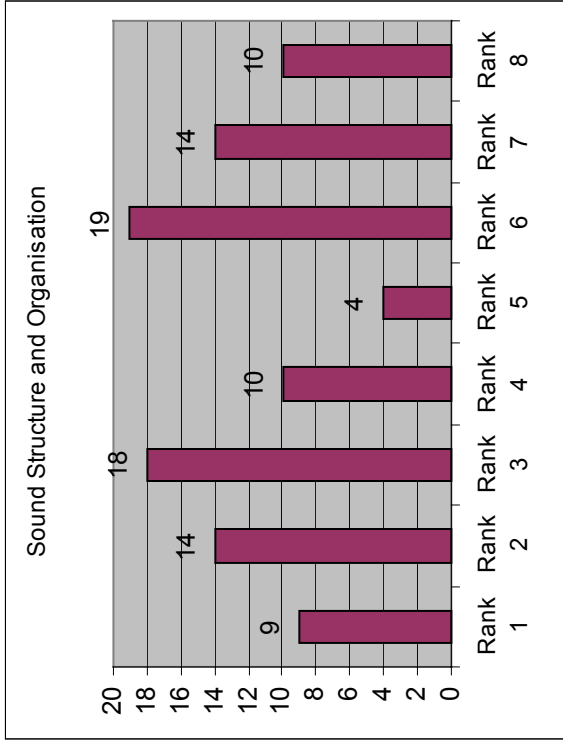


Figure 2

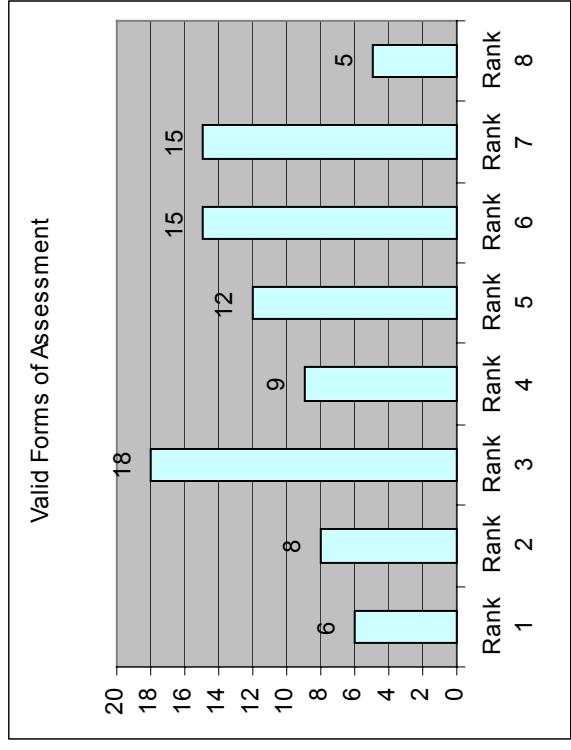


Figure 4

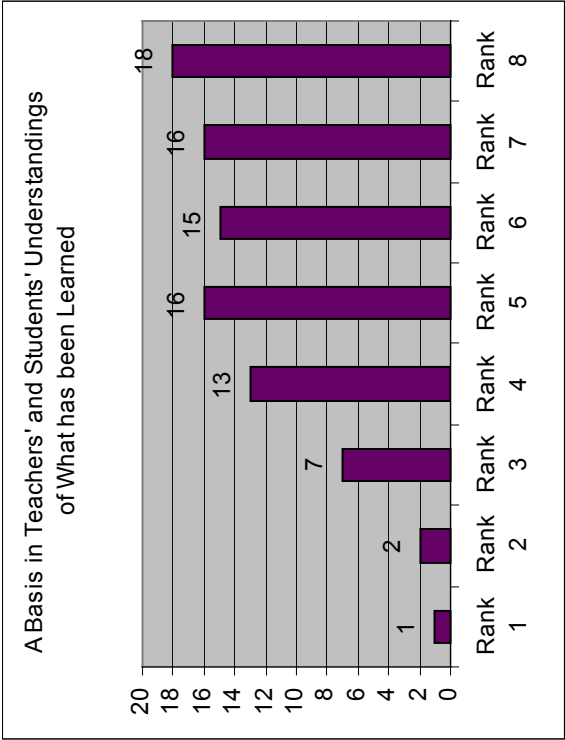


Figure 5

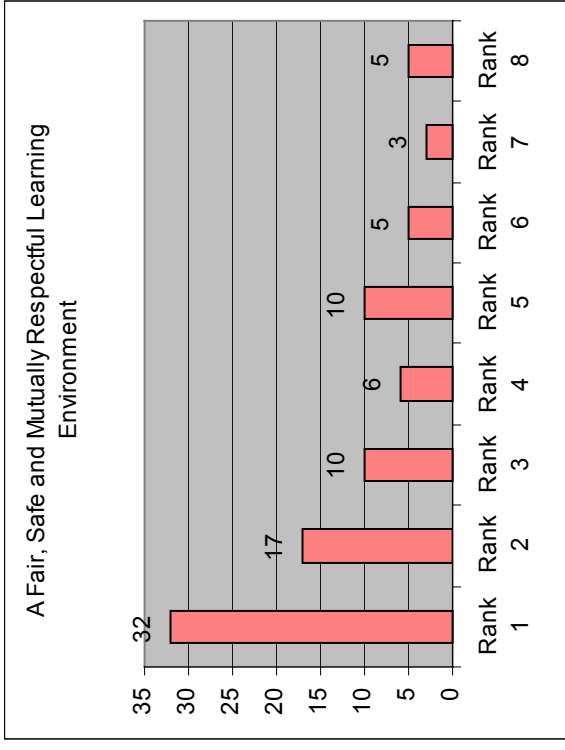


Figure 6

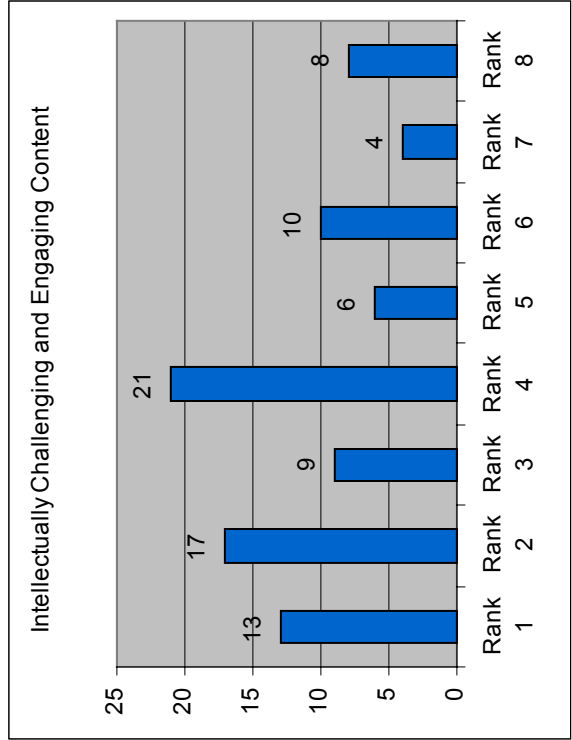


Figure 7

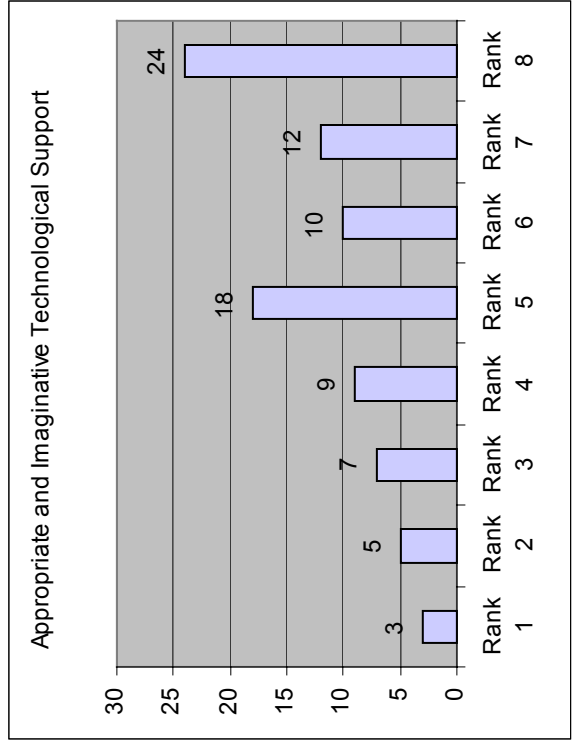


Figure 8

Discussion

Four items have been selected for discussion here; although each one generated a heated debate during the various forums.

Item 6, *A fair, safe and mutually respectful learning environment* was placed by over half of all participants in the first or second ranking. It was seen that the conditions already existed for this to be established and reinforced. Although one Faculty did comment that while this held for the students it was not always present in school administration on occasions when decisions were made with less consultation than was desired. However, it was conceded that such consultation was not always possible in a fast moving and complex environment.

Just as there was a high level of agreement regarding Item 6 as one that was less difficult to remediate there was also a degree of consensus regarding Item 8, *Appropriate and imaginative technological support*, as one presenting considerable challenge. Only twenty four of eighty eight teachers placed this within the first four rankings, while almost half placed it at either 7th or 8th. Discussion, generally centred around the word “imaginative”. Teachers perceived that they were becoming more capable and skilled in various ICT applications, but they were less supported in and less supportive of using them in imaginative ways in their subject domains.

Item 3, *Connection to prior learning, cross curriculum learning and students’ experiences* was also seen as relatively difficult to improve. Discussion suggested that too many components had been embedded in the item. Whereas connecting to prior learning and students’ experiences was less problematic, cross curriculum learning was seen as increasingly difficult as the students moved from middle school to the senior years.

An item that produced a bi-polar response was number 2, *Sound structure and organisation*. This was an item that was dependent upon individual pedagogical stances adopted by teachers. In every faculty the item was dispersed. It seemed to be the level of teacher’s own ways of managing and organising the curriculum that produced their responses.

What next?

As a conclusion to each Forum faculty members were asked to consider what they believed might be their focus as the Commissions of Enquiry progressed. It seemed that they particularly valued the structure of Forums, which tended to depart from the ways in which the Commissions were often appropriated as a time to deal with administrative matters rather than large, school wide issues, but from a Faculty perspective. The points that are reported here are common to the various Forums. Some were more specific and have not been included.

- Further faculty forums – having these discussions allows for healthy interactions between all faculty members.
- More faculty brainstorming using creative approaches.
- There is a concern that the ‘School Community’ is more caring and supportive. We are very caring of students, but there needs to be more care and support for staff, especially when individuals or groups face challenges or issues. There needs to be greater ‘openness’ and direction of where the school is going and changes that are planned. We need to be aware of the chaos we are going to face.
- A generic vision shared by all staff that allows for long term planning to fulfil a long-term objective.
- Traditionally the school has been a leader of change, unfortunately, it wants to lead every change. Piecemeal approaches that never lead to fruition are a waste of time and energy and innovation.
- We need to develop a clearer understanding of the whole picture of the school strategy as it stands now, recognising that the school’s climate is constantly changing.
- A recognition of the valuable contribution of the teaching staff – a sense that we are valued.

- I think 'chaos reigning' is a good concept for flexibility and growth, but the satisfaction of achieving something needs to be considered too.

Time

- Take more time to plan.
- Time to assimilate information, plan and prepare.
- Time to focus on the 'small picture' as well as the 'big picture'.
- Less time taken in meetings/opinion swapping/arguing/ideas sharing and more time in which we can bring something to a conclusion.

Pedagogy and Organisation

- Focus on integration, start with Year 9?
- Assist us in meeting student needs – we need more information on students' individual needs.
- Aim for a rich curriculum.
- Scope and sequence learning in the Middle School.
- Develop more meaningful assessment tools.
- Find out more about what others are doing in terms of the 'whole person curriculum' and create links to enhance learning.
- We need to treat more diverse media and seriously approach the task of making girls more critical.
- We need to think imaginatively about real time learning on line.

Professional Development

- Identify priorities and maximise the learning experiences of students.
- Examine the logistics of continuing professional development without destroying classroom learning time.
- Have an articulated professional development plan, including opportunities to attend specific courses.
- Consider how to enhance leadership in the Faculty and beyond.
- Develop models of good practice in programming for learning..
- Explore how we will manage the new curriculum, how we will be able to track outcomes and engage in rich assessment tasks.

Eighty eight participants, seven Faculty Forums. This brief synthesis of findings cannot and does not reflect the full richness of the interactions of these learning groups. However, it does provide evidence that when the conditions are created for whole school professional learning discussions will be robust and can be generative of the formation of ongoing policies for improvement.

Discussion

These case studies, varied as they are in their content, both point to an number of key conditions necessary and desirable for the establishment of collaborative school-based professional learning. We see in both of the case studies at least small quantities of each of the conditions for effective teacher development developed by Susan Loucks-Horsley et al (1987), namely:

- Collegiality and collaboration;
- Experimentation and risk-taking;
- Incorporation of available knowledge bases;
- Appropriate participant involvement in goal setting, implementation, evaluation and decision making;
- Time to work on staff development and assimilate new learnings;
- Leadership and sustained administrative support;
- Appropriate incentives and rewards;
- Designs built on principles of adult learning and the change process;
- Integration of individual goals with school goals;
- Formal placement of the program within the philosophy and organisational structure of the school.

To these we might add a commitment to evidence-based practice within schools. A number of elements have fostered the growth of a culture of inquiry within both of these schools. A culture of inquiry can be seen as a natural by-product of a true culture of professional learning, and that there are several factors which have led to the flourishing of such a culture within these and other knowledge building schools.

The first is the commitment of school leadership and executive. In both of these schools, the current principal has worked consistently to encourage teachers to be learners, through pursuing postgraduate study, engaging in professional reading, attending courses and workshops and joining networks. It is this commitment which allows practitioners to take the requisite risks associated with collaborative learning and practitioner inquiry, for as Marion Dadds has noted, such risks are significant:

[In self-study] we may be entering into processes by which we deconstruct some basic, historically rooted views of ourselves. In such processes our existing images of the professional self will be challenged, questioned, re-thought and re-shaped in some degree. These processes are necessary if change and development are to occur and self-study is to lead to new learning. We cannot escape them, nor the discomfort they may bring if we value our commitment to professional development. (Dadds, 1993:288)

The second factor relates to resourcing and as such is closely linked to the first. In comparison to many schools, both of these schools are very well resourced, and we are very conscious of this issue of privilege. Each school has a professional development budget which reflects its commitment to staff learning and enables fairly high levels of support. The creation of leadership roles within the schools dedicated to the support of teacher learning generally and the facilitation of practitioner inquiry is an example of this, as is the 'L5' initiative itself.

In terms of the development of activist professionals, participation in practitioner inquiry and other knowledge-building activities have assisted in elevating teachers' views of their practice far beyond their own classrooms. Sachs (2000:93) claims that "the activist professional creates new spaces for action and debate, and in so doing improves the learning opportunities for all of those who are recipients or providers of education." An observation of these and other Coalition experiences shows that such spaces are opening up both within and outside the schools at the hands of their teachers. Collegial conversations predicated upon trust engendered through working together in new ways, exercising professional judgement in a range of contexts and engaging in reflective practice and self study within a collaborative framework are on the rise within the schools. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that for many teachers, collaborative professional learning and practitioner inquiry have been instrumental in prompting a revisioning of their professional identity through providing transformative moments through the linking of their work to broader educational endeavours and helping to conceptualise themselves and their work in new ways which transcend traditional divides such as subject areas and the age or stage of their students.

Conclusion

The title of this paper is 'Holding a Mirror to Professional Learning', and our aspiration has been to do just this. However, the mirror is not an innocent domestic object, and holding a mirror to professional learning comes with a number of health warnings. Mirrors can produce distorted images, as some of us have learned to our great cost when reversing our modern cars which come with a warning that "objects in this mirror may be closer than they appear". Further, mirrors can reflect different versions of reality depending on perspective from which we view them. They can reflect the things we don't want to see, ('mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the cleverest of us all?'), are fragile, and when broken can bring the holder seven years bad luck. Not something one would wish for in the context of professional learning.

As McLuhan (1967) originally observed in his discussion of new media, the rear view mirror presents a backward glance at what has been. However, in later thinking he reconstructed the

metaphor and suggested that perhaps the rear view mirror can indicate what is coming up from behind. It is our hope that the mirror that we have held up to professional learning both documents what has been and anticipates the ongoing conditions for sound professional learning.

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