Collegial Learning and Collective Capacities

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Abstract

According to MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed (1997) schools have a range of collective capacities and depending on how those capacities are utilized as to the degree of benefit that can come from the resulting collaboration. Looking at school as a learning organisation Yinger and Hendricks-Lee (1993) argue that ‘ecological intelligence’ is more than a crude sum of the parts. There is not much doubt that this ‘ecological intelligence’ and the collective capacity of any group, used wisely, advantage all involved. This process has been proven yet again through a research program as part of the “Fair Go” research concentration at the University of Western Sydney. This is a program where it is expected that the people within the school community (teachers parents and children) will collaborate and together develop ‘new’ or ‘improved’ classroom pedagogy. We have taken this collaboration one step further.

This paper will describe the processes and the results of forming not only a collaborative group within one school but also of the forming a collegial network across five schools in the Western Sydney. After several meetings participants decided on a common core of professional development, that of student engagement leading towards improved student outcomes. While each school took its own pathway there were many commonalities. A collegial network was formed and a network team developed. The benefits of such a network at both individual school level and at the collegial level are great with the collegial learning and collective capabilities profiting all those involved.
Collegial Learning and Collective Capacities

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While the terms collegial learning and collective capacities are well established a literature search revealed that the term collective capacities was used widely in the corporate world while collegial learning was used extensively in the world of education. As a discussion of a professional learning process this paper puts forward the proposition that both collegial learning and collective capacities are necessary for optimum learning to occur. Individually each of the processes these terms represent are valued and seen as important to learning. Collectively, however, they demonstrate that such collaboration ensures continued development among the team members. Professional learning that is shared results in not only a sustained gain for the individual but also a team nexus where the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. This axiom is not new but by combining collegial learning and collective capacities we are able to introduce an interesting format for professional learning. This paper will discuss the way in which these two processes interlocked as we moved through several stages of professional learning for five school communities.

Collegial Learning

Collegial learning is the learning that occurs as a result of collaborative teamwork where participants construct and develop a greater depth of knowledge than that available to them where they work by themselves. The literature supports this notion as Flores (1998) puts forward the tenet that collegial learning is more than thought as knowledge is more than information. Collegial learning is moving from thought to action and it occurs over time. Similarly knowledge is information that is put into action. If we combine these notions with Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal learning we have a strong theoretical foundation for building a framework of collegial learning. Trust also is an essential condition for developing these strong relationships so that the actions lead to knowledge sharing through collegial learning.

Collective Capacities

Collective capacities are the surfacing of the many and various capabilities of individuals and collectively using them to generate a learning community. The developers of the School of Management Program, emanating from UCLA (2003), stated that central to establishing conditions necessary for effective teaching and learning collaborative learning and collegial planning must be included. They go on to say that there is a need to build the capacity of school communities to maximize learning. They further commented that change within that community will not be sustainable without involvement of everyone within it using both the capacity and the collegiality of the participants. Looking at school as a learning organisation Yinger and Hendricks-Lee (1993) argue that ‘ecological intelligence’ is important in that it is more that a crude sum of the parts. There is not much doubt that this ‘ecological intelligence’ and the collective capacity of any group, used wisely, advantage all involved. Flores (1998) supported this idea in stating that the most important capacities are the collective capacities and these are not the sum of the individual capacities but those developed by the team as a unit. Cagna (2001;p3) noted that learning is best when it involves motivated, curious people working together to build their individual and collective capacities for effective action. According to MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed (1997) schools have a range of collective capacities and depending on how those capacities are utilized as to the degree of benefit that can come from the resulting collaboration.

As a result of examining the literature and our experience we believed that by combining collegial learning and the collective capacities of school communities we were able to develop a richer more sustainable level of professional learning than we would have should we have tried to work with each school individually. As we worked through the program reported on in this paper, the role of mentor emerged. Collegial learning and collective capacities did not just happen. There needed to be a conscious structure and planned mentor roles to facilitate the professional learning within the learning community. Rolfe-Flett (2002) emphasised the importance of mentoring conversations before, during and after such programs. While these conversations are seen to be a one on one relationship we have found that group mentoring is also a necessary part of the individual and community learning.

The literature is rich with research that argues the pros and cons of various professional learning models. This paper will not argue or dispute any of these models nor will it put forward an alternative model to replace all others. It will, however, demonstrate the value of combining collegial learning and collective
capacities to strengthen and support both the learners and the learning within a collaborative community. It will also show that jointly constructed learning is sustainable, as it becomes the foundation of the community involved.

The Program

The Fair Go Research consortium has been working in schools in South West Sydney for five years. Its focus has been investigating children’s learning in the Priority Funded School Program (PSFP) schools. Of particular interest has been the way the children engage with their learning and the processes and parameters that ensure engagement occurs. It is here that we acknowledge the influence that the Productive Pedagogies (Hayes, Lingard, & Mills 2000) have had on the deliberations of this work. Running parallel to this research has been our teaching practices at University of Western Sydney within the primary education. While searching for new answers for both our students and the schools we were researching in, an opportunity arose for us to further extend our work in five schools that were seeking support for the funded in which they were involved.

The second author of this paper who was at that time the Principal of one of the school’s, fuelled this opportunity. She had been involved in the Fair Go project for some years and through it and her collegial network, was aware of the needs and similarities of the five schools wishing to enter the program. After several meetings with the schools and the researchers a consortium was established and a plan developed. Each school had heard of the Productive Pedagogies and wanted to know more. Each school wanted to be able to demonstrate that sound professional learning resulted in strong and innovative teaching. For this program to become a reality two people needed to be employed; an academic and a liaison facilitator. The academic was to lead the program and assist in data collection, reporting back to the schools and assisting with the final evaluation of the project. The liaison facilitator was to be the contact person for the schools and the organizer for the meetings and cross-school experiences. She also kept notes of all events and experiences resulting in a plethora of data. Each school had a project committee to put the processes in place at their school. It should be noted here that this project was for every teaching staff member and the executive at each of the five schools and it was expected that they would participate.

The process

This program consisted of variety of experiences. These experiences, however, did not take place according to a rigid format. They were planned on a needs basis and were woven between the various schools and events to maximize the opportunities and available expertise (Figure 1). Even so when embarking on a process such as this there is a need for a basic structure that ensures all participants are involved at as multiplicity of levels. The experiences included in this process were meetings, academic support and input and cross-school and within school sharing

1 PSFP schools come within a low-socio economic band. The schools we are working in are representative of many such schools and are in South Western Sydney. Nearly 2 million people (one-tenth of Australia) live in this region, many of whom are from diverse cultural backgrounds (including the largest concentration of Aboriginal people in the country). There are substantial numbers of people living in poverty. These people live either in cheap private housing or in the countless public housing estates throughout the area. Quite a few of the housing estates are 100% public housing communities that are frequently ‘entry-level’ places taken up by the most needy. The region has high levels of unemployment (twice the national average) with youth unemployment a particular problem. Community services have been historically lacking in comparison with other more affluent areas. Some suburbs in Sydney’s South-West attract considerable media attention. Western Sydney generally suffers from a negative stereotyping of its communities.
Meetings.

Meetings were assembled for several reasons. Initially they were for planning and organizing and these were at both the cross-school (usually among the principals) and within school level. Later they became debriefing meetings and mentoring opportunities. As one of the principals said ‘If I had been on my own I don’t know what I would have done. I have found this partnership great because I now have someone to talk with about what we are learning.’

The cross school meetings were organized by the liaison facilitator and were run by the academic. The purpose of these meetings was to pool ideas, needs and resources to maximize the benefits of the program. They also used focus group discussion, mentoring conversations and feedback sessions to further emphasise the value of sharing the expertise and capacities of all involved. As one participant put it ‘These meetings have helped to clarify a lot of issues by seeing the different focus of the schools and the expertise available’.

The within school meetings included project committee meetings, staff meetings, and collaborative group meetings. In fact the staff of the schools involved clearly stated that the interest groups or stage two meetings within the school has had a great impact on their development. They have asked that these meetings be maintained despite the funding situation.

Academic support and input

The relationship between the schools and the academics was developed in several ways. The first was as support and guidance in the individual projects. This development was chiefly carried out by the ‘employed’ academic who along with the liaison facilitator developed mentoring conversations with the principals and the project committees. Other academics from the Fair Go project were called upon to introduce an overview of student engagement to the entire staffs of the five schools at a combined after school program meeting. As the needs of each school came to the fore academics from the Fair Go project became participants and worked with the schools on a needs basis. To initiate this part of the program a cross school staff development day was held at the University of Western Sydney were further work was done on student engagement and every teacher had the opportunity to ‘sample’ the type of professional development each of the academics could offer. The individual schools then produced a plan for the input of the academics at their school. Some of these inputs were staff meetings while others were in the form of classroom teaching and demonstrations and small interest group meetings. As a result of the university connection some teachers commented that they felt re-energized by utilizing the university resources and expertise. They have revisited (their pedagogy) and learnt new things.

Cross-school and within school sharing.

Some of the strategies used have already been mentioned above in the form of staff development day and the combined after school program meeting. Cross school sharing was also carried out at the principal level with regular meetings being held to support this group. One principal stated that such meetings gave them the opportunity to talk with other principals in a open forum. The more we worked on this program the more we realized that in the current system in New South Wales the principals received limited support but not what they necessarily needed at the academic or educational intensity commensurate with their position. As one principal commented ‘We have been given an educational purpose and have been able to focus on educational issues’. Cross school sharing at the teaching level took place as individuals from one school met with the others schools to share their experiences. Data were also shared, via the academics and liaison facilitator, across the schools as the ideas for data collection and learning processes accumulated.

The highlight of the within school sharing came through the stage teaching groups and teaching buddies. The fact that the whole school was involved meant that there was a common language being used and no one felt excluded.

Key Issues.

Arising from the above procedure and the interactions between all those involved, issues that were key to the process, needed to be considered. These issues are core to the replication of this process and the future development as the projects enter their second year. The personnel involved, the goals of the projects and the conversational opportunities were seen as the most important issues by both the principals and the university personnel.

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2 Stages in these primary schools refer to class organisation that is based around the developmental level of the children in regard to the three stages as set out in the English Syllabus.
In discussion with the principals the role of the two employed people was vital to the development of the program. The liaison facilitator’s role of support, organisation and input was seen as ‘a great asset’ to the program. This position was reliant on two aspects, that of the prior experience of this person and also of her ability to interact with people and facilitate the projects through her willingness to listen and learn. In this respect the prior learning came in the form of the applicant being a retired principal who could relate to the project personnel and assist in tying in what we were doing with the requirements of the education system. The principals felt that this qualification was crucial to the position. The other employed role, that of the academic, also needed to demonstrate two aspects. Time was one of the important features here. This role was certainly time consuming and could not have been done if the academic wanting to be involved at this level within this program was attempting to do it over and above the normal workload. Fulfillment of this role meant that time had to be ‘bought out’ from the workplace so that adequate time could be given to the program. The second feature of this position was that of leadership and an affinity with the school contexts and therefore, ‘having a person who can make the link with the university and the schools’ (principal comment) was vital. The role of the principal was also important in this framework. While we understand that the principal is very involved with the administration of the school this program highlighted the need for them to play a pivotal role, not only for the good of the program but also for their own development as an educator. Some comments from the principals capture this feature.

‘We are all learning together and now have the opportunity to learn with our staff’
‘I now have a different knowledge of my staff that I didn’t expect to happen.’
‘Principals supporting each other. It is the professional dialogue between us. It is so rich.’
‘This collegiality with each other and the uni has given me the framework to operate in’
‘We tend to lose the passion for teaching when we become a leader but I have gone to the readings [circulated during the program] and can now talk with credibility.’

A second issue to be considered is that of a common goal among the participants. Even though each school had its own specific goal for its individual project, the group as a whole had a common goal that centralized the program and enable the sharing and knowledge building that was integral to the collective. In this case the common goal was: _enhanced outcomes through improved student engagement._ This focus could be dealt with both collectively and at the individual level as required.

‘We need to have conversations about learning’ was a comment from one principal. The opportunity for such conversations was imperative to this process. The cross school and within school processes had to allow for interactions of this nature. These interactions were integral to the collegial learning and the discovering of the collective capacities. The participants have noted that they now have ‘time to talk and have conversations about what they are doing and to share their knowledge’.

**Collegial learning and Collective Capacities**

During the course of this program we have processed many new ideas and have learnt a great deal. So how has the nexus of collegial learning and the collective capacities become the focal point of this program? Support, teamwork and professional dialogue have been integral to the process. Emanating from these practices has come a greater understanding and a professional language that was not evident previously. The notion that we were all working toward the same goal gave us a basis for these conversations and the continuing of the process legitimized them. Participants were not afraid to make suggestions or to ask questions. These interactions led to a comfortable sharing of the capacities of those involved. One of the many demonstrations of collegial learning and collective capacities came one night at a meeting of the principals. They were discussing the difficulties they were having with teachers whom they could not convince about the quality of their teaching. ‘A pat on the back did not seem to work’. We talked about this issue for some time when two of the researchers simultaneously realized that the ‘insider classroom’ model (Appendix 1) we had been using to explore classroom discourse, including teacher feedback, was also applicable to this situation. We then modified this model and produced the ‘insider school’ model (Appendix 2) that we believed would assist the principals as they worked with their staff.

The claim of sustainability featured extensively in the introduction to this paper. There are several instances that support this concept. The fact that the staff wanted to continue to have the group meetings and reflections and the commitment to continue the model next year confirm this claim. Instead of losing participants as the program progressed we have gained some with others inquiring into the availability of a position in the program. We believe that while there are many contributions to such a program the most important sustainable factor is that by honoring the expertise of the participants and by providing...
opportunity for various groups to work together, we have undergone the extraordinary experience of seeing the alliance of collegial learning and collective capacities at its best.

References


Appendix 1

THE FAIR GO “INSIDER CLASSROOM”
(developing consciousness – “school is for me”)

Teacher Talk
(sharing power = power with – arbiter of knowledge, power and control - regulates behaviour, confers decisions about learning, promotes thinking and provides opportunities for students to talk and interact with each other)

Teacher Feedback
(explicit criteria judgement & feedback in relation to task criteria, performance & self-regulation of learning)

Student Talk
(sharing ideas, and processes – focus on learning, reflection, substantive conversations)

Student Self-Assessment (affective, cognitive, intellectual quality)

productive pedagogies & visible pedagogies
Appendix 2

THE FAIR GO “INSIDER SCHOOL”
(shared consciousness – teacher engagement in processes towards student engagement)

Professional Discourse

Mentoring and Collegial Feedback
(explicit criteria judgement & feedback in relation to task criteria, performance & self-regulation of learning)

Collegial Talk
(sharing ideas, and processes – focus on learning, reflection, substantive conversations)

Professional Self-Assessment (affective, cognitive, intellectual quality)

shared views about pedagogy and visible processes