LEARNING ABOUT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: CASE STUDIES OF SCHOOLS AT WORK IN NSW

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ABSTRACT

The extent of the human and financial resources that teachers have access to for their professional development, and the extent to which they have the capacity to determine when, how and with whom learning takes place, are key factors in determining the quality of professional learning that results.

The NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) is the largest employer of teachers in the southern hemisphere. In 2004 it introduced a four-year, $144 million program supporting teacher professional learning and a new policy framework for the area in response to needs teachers and research have identified.

This paper describes some of the methodologies that are in place to tell the stories of how schools in a variety of locations throughout the state are going about interpreting the policy framework, the changes it is making to their practice, and the implications they see for the immediate future of their professional learning programs. It identifies some of the implications for research that arise.

INTRODUCTION

When considering the best ways to support teacher professional learning, education jurisdictions everywhere face the same key issues. Many of these can be distilled to the fundamental questions of how best to resolve points of tension and seek a balance in at least the following dimensions:

1. Responsibility - where there is a tension between an employer’s responsibility to provide opportunities to learn and support for learning- especially in situations where strategic professional learning priorities have been set for the organisation- and the teacher’s obligation as a professional and as an employee to engage in continual learning.

2. Resourcing - where there is the question of how and where to apportion funding for professional learning: to the individual teacher?; to the school?; to the local district or regional level?; or to jurisdiction-wide operational work? Or to combinations of these?

3. Policy frameworks - where there is an accountability to assure appropriateness and cost effectiveness in the use of funds through regulatory policy frameworks and transparent reporting
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requirements while at the same time creating enabling conditions necessary for creativity, innovation and responsiveness to local contexts. Where there is also a need to promote both pressure for change and simultaneous support for change, and to build capacity, capability and sustainability while at the same time assuring accountability.

4. Focusing of professional learning- where there is the question of reaching a position on where the main locus of decision making about teacher professional learning will lie- at the individual level?; at the school level?; or at the organisational level? Will it be centralised or devolved, or a dynamic relationship between the two?

Questions of this nature acknowledge that there are broader centrifugal and centripetal tendencies that exist in all education jurisdictions that are shaped and resolved according to context, government policy, available resources, professional practice and research.

THE NEW SOUTH WALES CONTEXT

The NSW public education is the largest education system in the southern hemisphere. Consistent with other education jurisdictions, the history and evolution of its policy making around teacher professional learning can be traced and analysed through the above dimensions as it has responded to its context.

In 2004, the latest iteration of this evolution has seen a four-year program established with the following features.

1. Resourcing

   Core funding of $36 million per annum has been allocated by the NSW Government to support teacher professional learning, a total of $144m over the period 2004-2007.

   Of this, $33m annually is provided directly to schools as a tied grant for teacher professional learning and $3m is preserved for the development of regional infrastructures supporting professional learning through teacher networks and professional development programs.

   Some schools receive additional funding for professional development through targeted equity programs (for instance, the Priority Action Schools Program; the Country Areas Program), or through programs supporting innovation such as the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program.

   Funding is allocated to the school, not to the individual teacher. The quantum of funding to each school is determined by the number of full-time teachers on the staff. Allocations range from $600 per teacher for schools in metropolitan areas to $1 000 per teacher for schools in the more remote rural locations.

2. Policy Frameworks

   The policy framework is established by the Department’s Professional Learning Policy for Schools (2004). The policy was developed in 2003 from four major sources of information: research into teacher professional learning (an annotated bibliography is at [www.curriculumsupport.nsw.edu.au/teacherProfLearning](http://www.curriculumsupport.nsw.edu.au/teacherProfLearning)); reference to recent reports specific to the NSW context and involving extensive consultations with teachers and school groups (Ramsey, 2000; Vinson, 2002); identification of current good practice; and consultation with peak groups including the NSW Primary Principals Association, the NSW Secondary Principals Council (both professional associations) and the NSW Teachers Federation (an industrial union). The policy is accompanied by guideline documents outlining the accountability requirements surrounding the use of the funds.
The policy framework requires the formation of a school professional learning team to determine the focus of the school’s professional learning program and use of funds; the alignment of the program with the overall school plan and strategic priorities; and a consideration and integration of corporate, school and individual teacher priorities in determining the plan. School plans, including the professional learning component are signed off by the school education director. School education directors are currently responsible for around fifty schools in an education area.

An agreed, statewide framework provides seven broad priority areas against which schools record expenditures on teacher professional learning: beginning teachers; use of ICT in teaching and learning; literacy and numeracy; quality teaching; syllabus implementation; career development; welfare and equity. Each school has total discretion as to where it will apportion funds. An electronic financial reporting system in each school records expenditures.

In August 2004, a framework for the presentation of 2005 school plans was declared further strengthening the professional learning component. Developed in consultation with principals’ associations, the framework outlines the essential elements to be found in all school plans and provides sample formats for the presentation of the plan. (See http://www.curriculumsupport.nsw.edu.au/teacherProfLearning/index.cfm?u=2&i=12)

3. Responsibilities
Under the policy, responsibility for professional learning is seen as shared: between employer and employee; between school; region (there are 10 regions) and system. In practical terms, this means that major professional development programs supporting the implementation of system-wide priorities for teaching and learning and organisational change continue to be resourced and provided by the state office and integrated with regional and school planning.

While the DET is to be seen as the “preferred provider” of professional learning, schools do have the freedom to choose the provider that best suits a specific professional learning need provided that the choice can be justified as cost effective. This means that professional teacher associations and universities are playing a more prominent role in teacher professional learning.

4. Focusing
As can be seen from the above, the policy framework for teacher professional learning in NSW places the locus of decision-making at the school level with support from regional and statewide programs. The question arises as to the nature of the experiences schools are encountering and the observations they are making in the implementation of the policy framework. It is to this we now turn.

METHODOLOGY
Two methodologies among those in use in 2004 are described below: feedback loops and case-based learning.

Feedback loops
Feedback loops have been identified as particularly apposite to tracking professional learning in NSW given the nature of the school system. (Hargraves et al, 1994). From a system perspective, the question arises as to how feedback loops might be created in a way that build capacity and afford schools an opportunity to reflect on and evaluate their development in relation to work being undertaken in other schools. An over-riding research question, consistent with all research in policy-related areas, is indeed the extent to which the declared policy is in fact being reflected in school practice.
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In the second semester of 2003, twelve schools were identified as having good (although not necessarily “best”) practice in supporting teacher professional learning. These schools provided individual case studies of their current work and, in so doing, provided some entry-level data prior to the release of the new policy and funding at the commencement of the 2004 school year. The schools included large and small primary and secondary schools in metropolitan and rural contexts; central schools in rural areas catering for both primary and secondary students; and schools for specific purposes.

In the first two weeks of November 2005, the schools were invited to participate in a voluntary capacity in individual teleconferences to reflect on how and in what ways things were similar to or different from the previous year as an outcome of the policy and funding. The following questions were used as the basis for the teleconference:

1. How and in what ways is the new “Professional Learning Policy for Schools” (2004), and the related funding for teacher professional learning, making a difference, if at all, to supporting professional learning in your school?
2. What has changed in your school’s practice in supporting professional learning since 2003, if anything, as an outcome of the policy and funding?
3. Using the (attached) evaluation grid, and reflecting on your professional learning program this year, in what areas do you feel you have made progress (if any), and why?
4. What do you see as the key professional learning priorities emerging in your school planning for 2005? What lessons will you take from 2004 in dealing with these?
5. (In summary) Is there any significant observation, trend or issue you wish to identify from the introduction of the new policy?
6. Is there any question that you feel you should have been asked in this area, or would have liked to have been asked, but were not?

The composition of the school group was at the discretion of the principal. In some cases, principals chose to respond by themselves; in others they were accompanied by one or two members of the professional learning team; and in other instances there were up to six members of the team present. Conversations were recorded with a transcript being made available to the principal. Given each school’s continued willingness to be involved over time, the transcripts will provide the basis for a summative look over a five year period of the school’s development in this area. The schools were assured that any specific issues raised would not be identified with a specific school.

Using a grounded theory approach, the response of each school is being analysed to identify some initial themes. The responses across the schools will then be analysed to identify recurring patterns that transcend issues specific to school context and, from these, some categories formed.

From a methodological perspective, it suggests a second meeting with all of the schools together to comment on and validate the themes and categories that have been identified. Using the paper that results, a further stage will be to then work with the co-ordinators of the ten regional professional learning teams and their nominees, first individually then collectively, to raise the question of how and in what ways the experiences and observations of these twelve schools are similar to or different from the schools with whom they work. Regional co-ordinators will also use, no doubt, the resulting paper in their professional discussions with principals and regional teams responsible for supporting professional learning.

There is no suggestion of course that the findings from these twelve schools can be generalised to all schools. As indicated above, the intention here is to undertake a monitoring process that provides a sense of what is happening in some schools but does so in a way that helps builds capacity at a regional and across-regional level by promoting the sharing of observations, professional conversations and reflection on practice. It is anticipated that, out of this, will come an accurate perception of how things are in the specific contexts where the reflective process is undertaken. It is also anticipated that the approach will
assist in addressing a commonly-asked question of principals: How is my school progressing in relation to the experiences of other schools in this area?

**Case-based learning**
In a related study the Department is undertaking with the support of an *Australian Government Quality Teaching Program* grant, the Professional Learning Directorate is working with regional school support staff and 27 school teams to further investigate the dynamics of collegial professional learning relationships and school planning. Once again, the focus is on capacity building through a process of learning together. (Gereige-Hinson, 2005, forthcoming).

Utilising action learning cycles and collegial networking, the fundamental purpose of the study is to enhance the leadership capacity of school executive in designing and developing the professional learning component of school plans. Emphasis is on identifying and responding to issues that occur in individual schools, yet may be common to a number of schools. It is a process of first identifying and clarifying an issue or concern to be addressed as the case, then undertaking an in-depth analysis of the case before identifying possible responses through utilising multiple sources of information. A key tool of analysis is the Department’s *Leadership Capability Framework* developed in association with the University of Technology, Sydney. (See [http://www.curriculumsupport.nsw.edu.au/leadership/index.cfm](http://www.curriculumsupport.nsw.edu.au/leadership/index.cfm)).

The project is using a constructivist approach to develop and pilot both processes and resources that result. The professional learning processes centre on the development of cases that take into account the authentic contexts in which school leaders work. The project also incorporates an academic partner who acts as mentor and evaluator of the project.

Of specific interest to this paper are the issues that school teams are identifying as the basis for their cases. They include questions of how to make time to discuss, learn and reflect; how to develop a culture of learning; how to demonstrate the impacts of professional learning on student learning outcomes; how to reconcile school-based learning and outside expertise; how to develop ownership and equity in school professional learning plans; how to build flexibility and sustainability in school professional learning plans. An underpinning theme is an exploration of leadership style and professional learning.

As cases develop and responses are planned and tried out in schools, case studies will result. By mid 2005, both process and product will be made available to other teachers with responsibilities for developing the professional learning component of their school plan.

The early responses from the project participants are encouraging and attest to the value of its methodologies in supporting school planning. Building on the findings of a previous AGQTP study in NSW in secondary school Mathematics and Science faculties, case-based learning as a methodology is being seen as a way to draw on collective insights, and highlight the importance of reflection and professional discussion in developing creative solutions as an integral part of professional learning. It, along with the study that preceded it, are reaffirming the domains from the NSW DET *School Leadership Capability Framework* as a useful framework in facilitating deeper analyses and understanding of professional learning issues and in developing leadership skills for promoting cultures of professional learning.

Professional dialogue and discussion generated from the cases are highly valued. Participants comment that the cases promoted “honest dialogue” and provided opportunities “to develop additional insights and realistic view of skills required for professional learning”. They see cases as “provocations that will generate authentic reflection and discussion among staff” and allow for “collegial discussions, sharing of ideas”. “People will learn to become responsible not only for themselves but also for their colleagues".
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The cases are also viewed as a way to think more broadly and “prevent old answers being applied to new problems”.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As can be seen from the above, the focus within the NSW Department of Education and Training in 2004 has been on a new policy framework and resource application to supporting teacher professional learning in the context of overall school planning. Two approaches among a number to monitor progress and at the same time assist in building capacity and leadership density have been described.

With the passing of the NSW Institute of Teachers Act in July 2004, the formation of the NSW Institute of Teachers, and the articulation of a professional standards framework at four levels (graduate, competence, accomplished and leadership), teachers will have for the first time more explicit criteria against which to self-evaluate their teaching and professional learning needs. As we enter 2005, some research questions that come to mind are:

How and in what ways will the emergence of the NSWIT impact on school professional learning programs and practice?

As schools more clearly focus their professional learning programs on evidence-based priorities for student learning and school improvement, what preferences will emerge in the providers that are being called upon to address these learning needs- DET regional, state office, school-based colleagues? e-learning? University programs and academic partnerships? TAFE courses? Professional teacher associations?...

And, above all, the key question: what evidence is there emerging at a school level that focused school plans for professional learning are indeed impacting on the learning outcomes of students?

REFERENCES


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### SCHOOL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SELF-EVALUATION GUIDE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Alignment</th>
<th>Collaboration, collegiality and commitment</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Resource allocation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.</strong> Professional learning is organised around whole school priorities and outcomes and strategies are detailed. The school has a management plan with clearly stated professional learning goals, outcomes and strategies that are clearly linked to targets, which align with school priorities and DET strategic directions.</td>
<td>There is a strong sense of involvement by teachers in their PL. Teachers apply/use their learning in their school context. Teams are engaged in a variety of professional learning activities eg problem solving activities eg collaborative action research planning, developing materials, organising workshops or supporting staff in the classroom, liaising with consultants and presenters to adapt courses, prioritising needs, and reporting back to staff. There are regular team meetings and extended times for planning and unit development as required.</td>
<td>The school has a culture that values professional learning, encourages staff participation and sharing of innovative practices for improved student learning. Time is created for teachers to engage in positive working relationships, teamwork sharing and dialogue that are linked to whole school priorities. Trust is encouraged and supported among the school community. Teams are organised to work collaboratively to achieve common goals. There is effective communication to facilitate access to learning opportunities and resources, human and material. Teams provide ongoing collaboration with and feedback to staff. PL strategies drive change in the school as a large component of the school’s management plan.</td>
<td>PL funds allocated through collaborative decision-making and are directly linked to targets and goals embedded in the school management plan.</td>
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<td><strong>3.</strong> There is some reference to professional learning in the management plan, which may be linked to some targets but it is not fully integrated into the major targets and there are no detailed outcomes.</td>
<td>There is involvement by teachers in their PL. There are some collaborative activities but they involve a small number of teachers.</td>
<td>There is some awareness of the importance of participating in and sharing innovative practices with individual teachers or small groups. The school realises the need for change and there is some planning to facilitate positive working relationships, teamwork, sharing and dialogue. There is some collaboration and teamwork but it is ad hoc and not necessarily linked to whole school priorities or DET strategic directions.</td>
<td>Focus is on individual needs with some whole school needs and some teachers joining together to address common needs.</td>
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<td><strong>5.</strong> There is little or no reference to professional learning goals and outcomes or strategies in the management plan.</td>
<td>There is no evidence of collaborative activities and a few individuals make decisions.</td>
<td>There is little encouragement to share innovative practices. There is little teamwork sharing and dialogue. Time is not built into the school structure for teams to work collaboratively to achieve common goals. PL in the school is one-off; teachers do their own thing.</td>
<td>Decisions are dictated more by individual teacher requests than coordinated strategic planning.</td>
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<td>Ongoing learning feedback and follow-up</td>
<td>Range of school-based strategies</td>
<td>Multiple sources for evaluation</td>
<td>Accountability</td>
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<td>1. PL planning is centred on reflection of practice and its impact on teacher and student learning. Research is valued and PL is data driven and based on evidence. There is an ongoing review of targets and outcomes. Regular dialogue about targets to assess progress is encouraged. Longer-term courses are viewed as more effective than short-term. Support is from within the school and external.</td>
<td>A wide range of PL strategies is utilised by the school to address individual, team and whole school needs in accordance with the management plan and targets eg planning, developing materials, organising workshops or supporting staff in the classroom, liaising with consultants and presenters to adapt courses. PL content focuses on what students are expected to learn and effective teaching strategies based on research and experience. PL is predominantly school-based and built into the day-to-day work of teaching. Teachers have a good understanding of the theory behind practices and programs and adapt what they learn to their context.</td>
<td>PL evaluation is based on multiple sources of information on teacher and student learning including teacher portfolios, professional learning journals, student learning journals, observations of teachers, peer evaluations, student surveys, executive planning days, collegial dialogue, examination of value-added data and trends, external examination results, faculty action plans and evaluations, annual school report, monitoring and evaluation of student achievement of outcomes, formal and informal, qualitative and quantitative.</td>
<td>There is an internal tracking of funds eg on the OASIS system. Funding is linked to the management plan and there is a clear budgeting process. The principal closely monitors the budget expenditure and maintains progress reports which are reviewed regularly. There are program accountability statements and budget updates for different purposes and audiences eg school report, school council meetings and in newsletters.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>There is some variety in PL strategies, however they are not all directly linked to the management plan.</td>
<td>There are several sources of evaluation but they are limited to a particular type</td>
<td>There is internal tracking of funds but no clear budgeting process. Accountability statements and budget updates are not continuous.</td>
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<td>5. PL planning is ad hoc and based on attending whatever is available eg one-off one-day courses.</td>
<td>There is a limited range of PL strategies used in the school centred mainly on one-off courses external to the school.</td>
<td>PD evaluation is very limited in the nature and range of sources</td>
<td>Accountability statements and budget updates are not shared.</td>
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*Professional Learning Directorate, NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004*