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Addressing the Education of Boys: a community of practice approach

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**Researching Boys' Education: Findings from the Boys' Education Lighthouse
Schools Project**

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Abstract

The Boys' Education Lighthouse Project (BELS) has enabled clusters of schools throughout Australia to identify, intervene, research, and report on initiatives to improve boys' learning outcomes. In this paper we apply a community of practice model to analyse the BELS Project and consider knowledge building through student and teacher learning as the practice of the community in question. Clusters have focused on initiating new literacy programs, modifying teaching practice, introducing male role models or using ICT to improve learning outcomes. The four clusters considered in this paper show differing levels of development as communities of practice on a national scale, with respect to engagement, imagination and alignment.

Background

In recent years, the Australian Government has raised boys' education to an importance never enjoyed previously, so that between 2003 and 2008 \$27m. has been allocated to initiatives intended to improve boys' educational and social outcomes. The basis for this enthusiasm is far from solid. Although one Commonwealth report found that retention rates for boys were lower than for girls; boys were performing worse than boys on average; more boys than girls were deemed "slow starters" at literacy; and fewer males than females entered higher education, it concluded that with regard to gender and other variables, socio-economic status is most significant factor (Collins, Kenway, & McLeod, 2000). Nevertheless, the problematising of boys' education continues, and schools seeking funds to support curriculum and professional development are loath to turn away from the funding on offer.

Many, (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997a; Teese, 1997) argue that boys should not be treated as an homogeneous group, so the question should be 'which boys?'. The data show that those particularly at risk are Aboriginal boys, boys from working class areas, and boys from homes where the first language is not English (West, 1999). Patterns emerging in recent studies show particular problems recurring among these boys. To address these problems, the Inquiry into the Education of Boys asserted the importance of a strong foundation of literacy and numeracy in the early years of schooling, supporting male relationships in school, and the availability of male role models (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002).

The legitimacy of research into boys' education is not in dispute here. Boys share some common experiences of 'being a boy' in Australian society, and are likely to be influenced by dominant discourses of masculinity. The ways in which these discourses affect the life and learning of a particular boy in a particular classroom and community

are always matters for empirical inquiry, calling for ongoing observation and analysis by teachers and researchers (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002). In one such report, based on research with 1800 male secondary students in South Australia, Trent and Slade (Trent & Slade, 2001) recommended systemic changes, research into the nature of learning environments, and a better understanding of good teaching for boys. This accords with other research that has shown that teacher quality is more important than curriculum standards, class sizes or statewide testing programs in influencing differential learning outcomes achieved by students (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rowe, 2002; Shulman, 1997). Like many before them, Darling-Hammond and Rowe argue that improved teacher quality can and must be achieved through on-going professional development.

In 2003 the Australian Government initiated the Boys Education Lighthouse Schools (BELS) Project Stage One and followed this in 2004-5 with BELS Stage 2, in which around 350 schools in 50 clusters have devised and documented projects to improve learning outcomes for boys. The authors have been working with the clusters to trial new approaches, implement projects that improve boys' learning, identify teacher learning and meet reporting milestones. This paper considers the development of the projects, and the associated relationships between teachers, managers and researchers, using a model of communities of practice to describe and analyse successes and concerns.

Communities of practice

Community of practice is a term grounded in a social constructivist approach to learning and frequently applied to the management of organisational knowledge. Wenger (Wenger, 1998) describes a community of practice as a social system with a focus on learning. A community of practice must have internal and external focus for the group, and a sense of connection or interest in particular topics, or areas of practice, over time. Preece (Preece, 2000), in her work on online communities, uses the term purpose. Wenger suggests that indicators of a community of practice include sustained mutual relationships, shared ways of acting together, rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation, and knowing what others can do. To achieve this, Wenger suggests three facilities that are necessary: *engagement*, or physical and virtual places for people to come together; *imagination*, that is, materials and experiences with which to build an image of the world and themselves; and *alignment*, ways of having an effect on the world through action. It is clear that educational systems and projects have the potential to support communities of practice at a number of levels.

School-based professional development has gained in importance in recent decades as the value of learning situated in the workplace has been recognised. A national survey of more than five thousand Australian teachers found that nearly 80% participated in professional development activities organised by their own school (McRae, Ainsworth, Groves, Rowland, & Zbar, 2001). However, the survey measured input rather than outcomes and its emphasis on the term *activity* belied a view of formal program-based professional development, underplaying the contribution of reflective practice or using local evidence to support action research. School- and cluster-focused professional

learning, based on everyday practice, is encouraged by the framework of the BELS Project.

While an overarching national BELS framework exists, and there are different layers of expertise, there is valuable input from each level. At the local level, a cluster consists of a small number of schools usually located in close proximity to one another, although two clusters comprise schools of the same type from various states. These all have the potential to become communities of practice over time, especially as some clusters, or parts of clusters, have worked together previously. An appointed Cluster Leader, usually an experienced teacher, manages the project across all schools within the cluster. For further support at the cluster level there is also a Cluster Consultant (an appointed University contact with research expertise) who monitors progress and facilitates the evidence-based approach of the Project. The Cluster Consultant quality assures each stage of the Cluster's documentation.

The Cluster Leader and Cluster Consultant are answerable to, and supported by, state Node Managers, most appointed from Faculties of Education across Australia. The Node Managers, who have considerable expertise in relation to the education of boys, coordinate and manage clusters of schools, and liaise nationally with other Node Managers and the National Project team. The Node Managers are responsible for the final quality assurance of the projects for each Cluster in their Node, and can facilitate a sense of community at the broader scale. Each Node Manager is supported by a small leadership team including a National Project Director and National Project Manager of BELS. To address Wenger's requirements of places for engagement, and facilities of imagination and alignment in a national project, an online learning environment has been made available. This environment sits within the National Quality Schooling Framework (NQS: www.nqs.edu.au), described in some detail by Hartnell-Young and McGuinness (Hartnell-Young & McGuinness, 2005) and has the potential to link communities of practice at a national scale.

Boys' Education Lighthouse Schools (BELS)

The NQS framework is underpinned by ten dimensions of quality schooling (including beliefs and understandings, curriculum standards and targets, and professional learning, among others). By providing such a framework, the NQS also creates a space for shared discourse between practitioners, as participating schools work within the same broad structure to develop projects that address local needs. To this end, the NQS requires that clusters attend to a reporting process rather than a single reporting product. The structure of reporting is provided in four Your Cluster Project (YCP) documents which are required by each cluster.

YCP Stage 1 describes the school/cluster context and details the essential and distinctive features of the project. This stage requires the development of goals and targets and an explanation of the rationale for the project. It includes outcomes and expectations and how available resources are to be used. Stage 2 identifies assessment tools and data

collection strategies the school/cluster will use to monitor and measure the intended outcomes of the project. Baseline learning data needs to be collected at the commencement of the project. The school/cluster needs to identify the project targets and work out how the school will know when improvement has occurred. This means the core components of the evaluation strategy need to be in place and refinement of the project may occur during this stage. Stage 3 provides guidance to assist in identifying the strategies and processes to be used in implementing the project. The relevant key dimensions of quality schooling are determined, as well as additional resources required to support the project implementation. Stage 4 reviews and analyses the data and evaluates the outcomes of the project. The processes used to measure the goals and outcomes and the impact on student learning are identified and reviewed. Consideration needs to be given to unintended and ancillary outcomes, the impact of the project and implications for the future. As these documents are completed, they are quality assured and then uploaded to the website. This enables any school, whether or not they are in the BELS Project, to view the uploaded documents.

Once completed, the documents provide rich data for meta-analysis by those who are interested in both interpretive and quantitative research. The patterns thus identified can inform several constituencies including policymakers and the public. Similarly, the framework has the potential to bridge the divide between practitioners and researchers. While this approach may appear quite rigorous, especially to those teachers unfamiliar with such documentation, it reflects Fullan's (Fullan, 1993) argument that a combination of pressure and support is required for professional development to be successful. A top down approach of applying pressure without support can simply generate alienation and withdrawal, leading at best to superficial change. On the other hand, he says, support such as funding without pressure can result in change projects that do not focus on the important issues, and therefore fail to achieve desired outcomes.

Methodology

A feature of the pressure and support, and an important aspect of the BELS Project, is the relationship between practitioners and researchers. There are some similarities with the action research model, which is intended to be collaborative and aimed at improving practices, understandings and situations (Kemmis, 1999), and is therefore a participatory form of professional development. It values data collection and reflection and assists teachers to undertake their own research through treating their own ideas, theories, practices and work settings as important areas for analysis and critique. Ideally, teachers are active participants and co-researchers, working on the data with the researchers. Theory is not tested, but developed through the collaboration of teachers and researchers who work together to reconstruct meaning (Connelly & Clandinin, 1986). Recognition and suspension of the researcher's cultural values and expectations are therefore important, as openness to teachers and their context is essential.

The discourses of research and practice can be in tension, so that a documentation process such as required in the BELS Project, for example, can reveal gaps in understanding between the two, and provide opportunities for dialogue and dialectic. In a

smaller-scale, longer-term, study using collaborative practitioner research in conjunction with university researchers, a discursive environment developed where teachers were able to talk about their actions (Cherednichenko, Hooley, Kruger, & Moore, 2001). This environment also encouraged argument and critique. However, the research also discovered an apparent lack of explicit and agreed language or discourse of learning for teachers to value and present their work, apart from the system-generated language of standards and outcomes. One goal of a national project such as BELS might be to develop a shared language as part of a large-scale community of practice.

The BELS Project includes several face-to-face workshops for every cluster, where the researchers can meet and work with the teachers. Workshops in 2004 and 2005 focused on developing the cluster capacity to achieve the project outcomes; the evidence-based model underpinning the documentation; how to collect and analyse qualitative and quantitative data; and writing of documents titled “Your School Project” (YCPs) reports. Teachers need time and support to identify appropriate data, analyse it rigorously and write for the audience of practitioners and the education community nationally. This is provided by cluster consultants, university researchers, state system personnel or by experts in relevant fields of interest.

In order to explore the development and value of communities of practice in boys’ education at various scales for this paper, we reflected on the evidence from four clusters. Specifically, the data comprised four YCP documents written by each cluster¹, qualitative data gathered from workshops we conducted with the clusters, informal documents such as cluster newsletters, and our written reflections over a twelve-month period from the commencement of the project. First, these data were scrutinised for descriptions of context, evidence of problem identification and strategies implemented. As the BELS Project Stage 2 had not concluded at the time of writing, final outcomes were not available. Secondly we looked for developing communities of practice within the three infrastructures suggested by Wenger (1998), by considering evidence such as the references to teams and clusters (in contrast to individual schools), shared language and examples of outreach to other communities, both face-to-face and online. For the latter we also accessed each cluster’s material on their dedicated websites². Finally, we drew some tentative conclusions about the progress made towards a national community of practice in boys’ education. The next section presents our analysis of these areas.

Findings

For our analysis, we have chosen three clusters based on geographic proximity and one with members drawn from five states of Australia. We provide a brief description of their contexts and areas of concern drawn from their YCP documents, and other data noted above.

¹ The cluster reports of schools in the BELS Project are available through the National Quality Schooling Framework website (www.nqsf.edu.au).

² Each cluster has a dedicated website in Think.com in addition to the NQSF website.

Cluster A

Context

This cluster comprises four urban government schools of similar size and population in the Northern Territory, all within close proximity and serving strongly multi-cultural communities with high percentages of indigenous or migrant students. The populations of the four schools range from approximately 240-450 students. Each school is self-governing with its own incorporated School Council. Following a period of shrinkage, school enrolments are stable across the four schools, with new young families, with mostly low to middle incomes.

Issues

The schools identified four areas from the data available to them at the commencement of the BELS Project. In the common testing program (MAP) it was clear that boys across the NT were behind girls in both numeracy and literacy at Year 3, 5 and 7. If the schools could improve the results of their boys, they argued, the overall MAP results would be greatly enhanced. Secondly, behaviour management data collected from two schools of the cluster over 12 months (a sample of 500 data records) demonstrated that boys were involved in 86% of incident reports, compared with girls at 14% (based on the records for one year). The third element was the perception of staff that many boys feel alienated, displaying a loss of connectedness from their class and school, while the fourth was the fact that of the total teaching staff of the four schools (75) there were only eight male teachers. It was felt that, in light of the number of single parent families, there were many boys without an important or substantive male role model in their lives.

Strategies

A combination of strategies was chosen to address the issues identified. For example, all schools employed male role models for various hand-on activities, and leadership development programs including visiting sportsmen and politicians. Within the cluster, there is a focus on employing indigenous males to tutor in literacy and numeracy. Individual schools have a focus on different strategies, such as horticulture classes, leadership programs or dance. Surveys of teachers and students were undertaken to clarify the perceptions of low connectedness to school.

Cluster formation

The cluster YCP documents state that creating special programs for boys has taken the commitment of all staff and in each school has had a series of meetings and consultations leading to approval at a staff meeting and School Council. Each school has created a team to run the BELS project, comprising teachers, Individual Support Assistants, Indigenous Education Workers, and parents. The surveys of connectedness identified some surprising different views between teachers and students which gave rise to further discussion.

Much of the reporting refers to individual schools, including professional development specific to school needs. For example, 'a whole-school approach in one school led to a strong sense of belonging and connectedness through programs that targeted many students'. At another, there were thirty new enrolments, 'due to the community's positive

perception of the school's BELS program'. Boys are reportedly proud of what they have constructed through ICT in one school, and keen to share school experiences with parents and others. Parents have been most supportive of the programs in place and the information that has been shared with them about boys' development and learning, and in many cases reported more positive behaviours at home as well.

The cluster reports that the NQSF website has been an invaluable source of information and support material, however to this point, apart from the required project documents, little cluster material has been published in this way.

Discussion

The individual school teams in this cluster are working with a shared purpose and implementing a range of positive strategies. Although it is perhaps too early for substantial change, teachers can list successes from each of the projects, and are receiving press coverage. However, personnel changes among principals and cluster leaders, vacancies at the Cluster Consultant level, and the selection of individual programs at each school, may have contributed to a limited sense of cluster connectedness apparent in the YCP documentation.

Cluster B

Context

Five states are represented in this cluster of schools, each characterised by a dispersed student body enjoying a mix of face-to-face and online learning, and covering the primary and secondary years. Teachers are therefore also reliant on online communication, supported by occasional face-to-face meetings.

Issues

The cluster identified the problem of boys' engagement in schooling by referring to the completion rate of assignments, attendance at scheduled lessons, levels of participation during lessons and retention of students over time. These data showed patterns across the five states that indicated improvements should be made. Underpinning these concerns was a belief that increasing boy's literacy would increase engagement in learning.

The cluster saw the need to work together to address these issues, hence the first aim of the project was to consolidate a national distance educators network, as evidenced by well attended regular meetings and professional development activities, and the establishment of a 'teacher capacity' data bank. The second aim, which would be supported by Darling-Hammond and Rowe, was to build staff capacity in skills and knowledge for flexible curriculum delivery, as evidenced by test results from a 'teacher capacity for flexible delivery' tool; and the third aim was to improve the engagement of distance education students in the learning process, as evidenced by a 30% improvement in return rate of assignments, a 30% improvement in attendance at scheduled lessons, a 20% increase in retention rates, and improved student participation in lessons.

Strategies

All schools identified the need for more rigorous collection, collation and interrogation of data and common assessment tools. The First Steps³ continuum of learning was adopted as a tool for all schools to measure student progress in writing. More teachers have been brought into the project in each school to assist sustainability. Moderation of student work is emerging as a way of enabling conversations between teachers to build a common understanding of boys' writing, interests and next steps.

Cluster formation

The cluster reports that isolated schools, who had not worked together before, have moved toward a common purpose, focused on 'making a difference for the learning outcomes of boys'. This provides a basis for the practice of the community, while to support engagement, albeit in a virtual sense, the cluster teams now meet by teleconference on a regular basis. The lighthouse school presented all schools with a physical symbol, a 40 centimetre lighthouse, at a recent face-to-face conference. Numerous teachers reported that their daily work is isolating, and they value national collaboration with teachers in a similar setting. One wrote 'Change is more effective when more are united'. Another displayed the outward-looking characteristic of a mature community of practice when reporting on a resource 'that is both useful for our school, that will be transferable to other like schools, and that informs education across Australia'.

Others noted the value of communication between educators and researchers, through a series of seminars facilitated by leaders in the field of boys' education, enabling the lighthouse school to support the whole cluster. Similarly, the structured approach, with the opportunity to learn about doing a research project, and the academic rigour were valued by several teachers. One teacher indicated a sense of self-esteem in reporting as a highlight of the project 'a national approach to an educational issue that is quite unique'. The Cluster website on Think.com includes photographs, project summary and meeting agenda, all posted in the first year of the project.

Cluster C

Context

The third Cluster consists of government schools from a regional area of South Australia and one from the nearby metropolitan area. There are three secondary schools, one K-12 school and five primary schools. A 2004 report in the popular press had indicated that teachers in this state had the highest proportion of stress claims, greater than all of the other working professionals put together. Principals in the cluster wanted to ensure that the well-being of their teachers was supported through best practice training in developing productive pedagogical methods that really work with disengaged boys.

³ The First Steps literacy program was developed by the Education Department of Western Australia

Issues

The project identified three areas for improvement in the cluster: the writing literacy levels, engagement, and behaviour of underachieving boys. The evidence included statistics showing that 90% of incidents involved boys, anecdotal evidence indicating a negative attitude towards school in some boys, a feeling that boys were not being listened to, not wanting to write by hand, and that few were interested in reading.

The dominant issue cited by Principals in the cluster was the failure of at-risk boys from low socio-economic background to perform at the same level in literacy (benchmark testing) as their peers. However, this cluster acknowledged that the existing curriculum is problematic for young people from low socio-economic backgrounds, as the education system assumes all students come equipped with the dominant culture.

Strategies

Taking a 'place-based' approach to curriculum (Smith, 2002), the cluster offered alternative approaches to schooling to engage a wide range of students in the demands and opportunities of learning. This was prompted by work that has suggested the importance of considering local community practices in order to better devise literacy curriculum with clear potential for transfer to community purposes and action. The cluster adopted a whole-school change approach with high expectations for boys in all classes, based on an understanding that school change needs to connect classrooms to educational research. Underpinning the project were changes to school culture that focused on supportive teacher-student relationships, challenging unhelpful gender stereotypes, recognising the range of differences in the school population, and providing positive role models.

Cluster formation

Many round table professional development events, and a conference to bring teachers from the cluster schools together with others invited, were arranged to share project information. While this cluster reported regular collegiality at meetings, there was minimal attendance at workshops where members of the National BELS team were available to provide additional support and guidance. The cluster, however, reported the value of working with a University or professional experts in the focus area. Those involved also stated that the time commitment to such projects is 'enormous', so that they rely on goodwill as the financial incentives are not sufficient to cover the time and operating costs of the project.

Discussion

This cluster is operating strongly at the local level and across the practitioner-researcher boundary, and has organised a large cluster professional development activity open to others in the State. There is less evidence of connection with the National BELS Project Team, (based on attendance at national workshops and communication with the national office). At the time of writing, there were three postings on the Cluster website on Think.com.

Cluster D

Context

The Cluster is based in Melbourne, Victoria and comprises one government and five Catholic primary schools.

Issues

All cluster schools reported differences in student achievement levels between girls and boys. For example, in the Preparatory year the boys were slower to move up levels, and more needed Reading Recovery when compared to the number of girls. However, by the time students moved into level 2, the reading results were similar for both boys and girls. In the senior school, years 5 & 6, achievement levels in English and Mathematics were different for boys and girls. In English the girls were at or above the level in all strands, and significantly ahead of the boys in writing. In Mathematics the boys were at or above the level in Measurement and Number and were significantly ahead of the girls at this stage.

The cluster found differences in responses between the girls and boys in the upper levels to the Attitudes to Schooling Survey. The boys had strong self-esteem, felt safe and well connected to their peers. From Prep to Year 6, within the cluster, boys figured prominently in behavioural diaries and records because they were disruptive in class and required specific management plans for the school ground. Like many clusters in the BELS Projects, this cluster decided to focus on initiatives to improve boys learning outcomes in literacy to address the other problems.

Strategies

The cluster aimed to improve the standard of boys' writing, as shown by statewide test results and the Attitude to School Survey, and initiated programs that focused on two propositions: that successful schools cater for different learning styles preferred by boys; and that they develop positive relationships, critical to success. Schools worked on creating a shared whole-school vision and goals for the education of boys, and a curriculum that acknowledged and provided for the learning styles of all students, especially boys. Among other strategies, they also adapted instruction to the prior learning and learning characteristics and styles of students, especially boys and adapted the use of ICT in the learning environment to support the special learning needs of boys in particular. Specifically, the cluster trained seven mentor teachers to work with a coordinator in each school and conducted a pilot study. They developed a literacy planner acknowledging the four learning styles modalities and used it to plan a writing unit that focused on a particular text type.

Cluster formation

A major focus for this cluster was to establish good working relationships among staff from the different schools. Developing plans, documenting progress and establishing and undergoing a pilot study enabled the cluster to work collectively toward a common goal. After the pilot, the cluster reviewed its initial project goals and trial intervention strategies. The use of mentors to lead and support other teachers in the cluster was an

initiative that was supported by the results of the pilot. The mentors were able to incorporate and trial the use of writing templates as a teaching strategy, and initial results, from teacher surveys, suggested that the templates were an effective strategy and worth pursuing with a larger target group of boys as part of the major project.

In January 2005 mentors and coordinators ran a series of practical workshops for all teachers that focused on the work of the pilot project. Evaluations from the day showed teachers were responsive to the workshops and keen to implement the ideas and activities. The parent newsletter, BELS Bulletin, has directly involved the parents and friends of cluster schools and given the cluster project a strong community profile. The cluster reports that the project will reach beyond the cluster, as the mentors have been engaged by two groups of schools to run similar workshops.

The cluster reported that the 'strength of the project is to work as a group, with an infrastructure that will support our work when the project is finished'. Teachers are endeavouring to be at the leading edge of research with a focus on investigating and trialling the tools to improve pedagogy and meet the learning needs of students, in particular boys. The project has adopted a specific focus that is supported by current school charter priorities and 'enables us to go 5 miles deep rather than 5 miles wide'(YCP 4).

Discussion

This cluster is operating strongly at local level, using researchers and professional experts and reaching out to other local schools. However, at the time of writing, there were only three postings on the Cluster website on Think.com. The cluster reports that working on the literacy focus has been helpful as it has given teachers time to become familiar with and appreciate the structure and rigour of the NQSF. Familiarity with the framework will assist teachers to establish linkages between improving literacy and building positive relationships, and to link the two elements of the project.

Conclusions

In this paper we set out to review the manner and extent to which cluster projects have identified and addressed issues in the education of boys, and the extent to which communities of practice have developed. The national issue of boys' education provided a common purpose for each cluster, so that they met the first criterion of a sense of connection or interest in particular topics over time (Preece, 2001; Wenger, 1998).

We have analysed the data according to Wenger's three infrastructures for learning: engagement, imagination and alignment. In terms of engagement we considered the broad question 'how do we come together?' and included references to school teams, meeting together as a cluster, voluntary involvement in the online environment of the NQSF and the BELS site on Think.com. In considering imagination, we looked for evidence of cluster identity, such as shared language, symbols, and shared project focus, in light of the questions 'who are we and what are we working on?' In the third infrastructure, alignment, we considered the extent of, and attitude to, the formal YCP documentation, the rigour of the data collection and analysis, and effort to reach out to

affect a wider community. We have summarised this as the broad question ‘how does our project add to our knowledge and influence others?’ Table 1 shows a selection of the actual measures we used to flesh out the three areas.

Table 1: Engagement, Imagination and Alignment in BELS Projects

Engagement	Imagination	Alignment
<i>How do we come together?</i>	<i>Who are we and what are we working on?</i>	<i>How does our project add to our knowledge and influence others?</i>
Meeting face-to-face and online at various scales (local, statewide, national)	Sense of location in a wider world	Management procedures
Shared discourse	Using symbols	Rigour of data collection/analysis
Using NQSF and Think.com	Shared project focus across cluster	Timely documentation
Longer-term commitment	Evidence of reflection	Links with other communities
	Trying new things	Influencing decision-makers

Three of the four clusters (B, C and D) are providing opportunities for engagement, both physical and virtual, that are broader than the individual schools, and are developing aspects of shared language. Cluster B has developed its own facilities for engagement at a national level, but has limited evidence with other projects in the national web space, whereas Cluster C has engaged at a state level. The schools in Cluster A provide fewer facilities of engagement, such as coming together or shared tasks. In terms of imagination – *Who are we and what are we working on?* – we considered project focus and a sense of cluster identity, to determine that at this point Clusters C and D had made more progress towards being a community of practice than either Cluster A or Cluster B. The national project structure supports alignment, Wenger’s third facility through the common YCP documentation and the national website. However this has proved to be a difficult aspect for many clusters. D and C have made a little more progress than A and B, who have struggled to see a purpose for the rigorous reporting format. Sharing knowledge informally through Think.com is rather low for all four clusters. It appears to be too early in the project to see a capacity to influence decision-makers at a national scale and eventually, to affect the world.

This paper has provided a snapshot of the development of communities of practice within a cluster model of teacher professional development in the domain of boys’ education. Two of the characteristics of Wenger’s communities of practice model – engagement and imagination – are further developed than alignment, where one might expect real change to occur on a broad scale. Further work is being undertaken to establish the conditions that encourage the emergence of such communities that will enable communication of

school and cluster-based knowledge for national benefit. At this stage, it appears that for engagement, regular face-to-face contact remains necessary within clusters, enriched by online communication. This needs to be adequately resourced at school and national levels. A shared purpose and meaningful projects, as well as time for reflection, are important means of developing imagination, while alignment requires support for data collection & analysis and a teacher-friendly reporting framework.

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