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SYMPOSIUM: SYSTEMS MODELS TO SUPPORT INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

Collaborative Inquiry to Support Teacher and Student Learning: A University-School System Partnership

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Introduction

Inclusive education reform has challenged educators to develop policies and practices in schools that provide an effective education for *all* students. This paper explores how collaborative inquiry (CI) was important for teachers' professional learning about improving inclusive practices in their schools. It draws on my work in a university-school professional development partnership, the Learning Improves in Networking Communities (LINC) project from 2001-2005ⁱⁱ. The origins of the LINC project lie in a professional relationship built over ten years, with the director responsible for student support services for Catholic schools in Melbourne, Australia. Our experiences in previous professional development (PD) initiatives had highlighted the importance of contextual issues in attempting to transform practices in schools (Deppeler & Harvey, 2004). This project therefore represented a conceptual and practical opportunity to design a professional learning program that was both responsive to inclusive reform and generative of new practices.

Professional Learning Approach

The program was founded on our shared belief that transformation of practices can take place within a collaborative learning community in which teachers, alongside school leaders, inquire into their practice and participate in shared decision-making and conversation (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Little, 2003). I use the term professional learning (Hoban, 2002) to distinguish from the episodic, one-size-fits all professional development (PD) approach and to centre attention on teachers and their practices. Collaboration and inquiry are central to the professional learning approach and essential for the transformation of practices. Inquiry that is systematic, self-reflective and informed by evidence can be an effective tool for critically examining issues and influencing teachers' beliefs and learning about their practices (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Groundwater-Smith & Dadds, 2004; Timperley & Robinson, 2001). We adopted the term *collaborative inquiry* (CI) to describe our work. CI is one of several cyclical action research-based approaches that emphasise participation and democracy in the process of improving practice. (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000). Our intention was to support teachers and leaders to collaborate in researching and improving practices that would enhance the participation and learning of *all* students in areas that were important to their school. Our expectation was that the process would allow for different and alternative possibilities for inclusive practice within each school, and would contribute directly to developing those practices.

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The Research Process

The professional learning program is school-based and teachers along with leaders work in teams, conduct inquiry and submit research reports and reflective journals at six-month intervals. Teams varied in size from 5 to 12 members. The program is delivered over two academic years and culminates in a postgraduate qualification in inclusive education at Monash University. At the start of the project, teams are given information on the principles underlying our CI approach and support for using tools of inquiry and conducting research. Teams begin with a self-evaluation process - collecting, analysing and discussing evidence about the beliefs, policies, and practices in their school (Deppeler, 2006). We used LINC surveys Australian validated versions (Deppeler & Harvey, 2004) of the British Index of Inclusion (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughn & Shaw, 2000). This process enabled teams to determine priorities for development in their context and, at the same time, begin to use and understand the processes of CI. Teachers then address their team's priorities in different ways through individual investigations. Priorities are progressively refined for further investigation and improvement. Two other researchers and I collected data from multiple sources including: teachers' reflective journals, research reports, and presentations, emails occurring and between the participants and ourselves, surveys and audio recordings and field notes of meetings, observations, discussions, and interviews. Teachers monitored student learning and participation using observations, work portfolios, teacher assessment, and interviews. The multiple sources of triangulated data reflect an attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of the various perspectives during, and as a result of, the process of collaborative inquiry.

Teachers' Thinking

We emphasised teacher responsibility for collecting evidence to confirm or refute assumptions about student learning and participation. We also encouraged them to collaborate in examining each other's data and in making decisions about the foci for their initial investigations. We challenged teachers to reflect upon their explanations for student's disengagement and their expectations for these students. We reminded each other regularly that our stance was not to act as experts in advocating particular approaches but to prompt teachers to critically examine the beliefs they held about teaching and learning. We did not, however, allow teachers to uncritically reproduce deficit conversations about the students in their classrooms. We questioned their use of categorical labels of disability for determining instructional and assessment practices and attempted to focus their initial suggestions for inquiry on student learning and on what and how students' interpreted what was intended.

We expected that when teachers collected and then examined detailed observational evidence about levels of participation and learning, it would enable them to critically examine the impact of their practices on different students. This process, however, was not straightforward, and our early conversations revealed the beliefs and expectations teachers held about the more 'problematic' students in their classrooms. Teachers' varied with respect to their explanations for what they had observed in classrooms, their expectations for a student's capacity to learn and their beliefs about their capacity to teach these students. On the basis of their beliefs, teachers can be clustered into approximately three groups.

1. At least one or two teachers in every team believed that lowered participation or performance resulted from specific disabilities and deficits inherent in the students themselves. They did not believe they had adequate knowledge or skills to teach these students and felt obligated to seek professional expertise. They expected that the academic

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performance of these students could be partially remedied by withdrawal and specialist instruction. When asked about their expectations for lower performing students, teachers in this group believed that if students had not acquired basic literacy competencies by the end of primary school, they did not expect much improvement would occur during secondary school.

2. Most teachers believed that students' behavioural and learning difficulties developed for a number of reasons other than 'disabilities'. Although unable to suggest what practices might increase students' participation, their initial suggestions for inquiry typically focused on investigating practices that would improve the behaviour of the more challenging students in their classrooms.
3. A minority of teachers with responsibilities for literacy talked about curriculum and believed student's disengagement was due to inappropriate teaching for students' with literacy difficulties. Literacy was considered vital and these teachers were passionate about investigations focused on school-wide pedagogy that would result in all students experiencing positive literacy learning. While a number of these teachers noted that they did not feel confident to support the social development of students diagnosed with autism, they did not believe these students should be withdrawn from their classrooms.

In all schools, there was an important emphasis placed on the relationship between students' literacy competencies and their experiences of schooling. Literacy was viewed as a pivotal skill that enabled students to learn and to participate in school life. We supported the teams' by inviting a literacy educator to work with them in refining the foci for their investigations.

Developing A Common Language To Understand Practices

The literacy expert conducted workshop sessions using the Freebody and Luke (1990) *Four Resources Model* and a genre approach to text type and supported teams in devising a number of joint investigations. The sessions provided theoretical and pedagogical content to frame teachers' investigations, which, in turn, prompted the development of a common language to engage with evidence about student learning and to construct knowledge. Some members in each of the teams began by conducting an audit of all the work assigned to students, in the previous term, at a selected year level. Teachers collected the assigned tasks, along with the assessment criteria and examples of student work assessed as "well done" and "unacceptable". Interviews were held with teachers to clarify what understandings they had of the various tasks and criteria. It soon became clear that not only did teachers use different criteria for similar assignments but they also had different understandings of what constituted a 'report' in science or history and what was meant by an 'essay'. Using a common language, teachers were able to talk to one another and engage with the audit evidence. These discussions allowed them to unravel understandings about what it meant to be literate and to consider the impact their various understandings had on students. It also allowed them to think about their assessment practices in new ways and focus attention on previously overlooked assumptions about student learning. A particularly powerful example in this respect involved the collaborative examination of students' writing. Teachers ranked four samples from the least to the most successful attempts at writing an argument and explained their ranking. The sample unanimously ranked as the least successful was because of poor spelling and grammatical construction and handwriting that was difficult to read. When teachers then re-examined the samples using explicit criteria, writing strengths previously unnoticed became apparent, allowing teachers to shift their ranking of the pieces. For example, teachers agreed that lowest ranked sample

had achieved the overall purpose of the text, which was to ‘put forward or justify a point of view’ and was generally structured in accordance with the expected stages for this text-type. Although spelling was an area that would need attention, teachers agreed it was a far less important criterion. Teachers’ comments after this activity and in reflective journals frequently mention the importance of this activity in changing the assumptions they made about students who experienced literacy learning difficulties. The following extracts are illustrative:

I realise how inconsistent we can be in assessing. When you get to look at this list of criteria and you start looking deeper into it, it exposes different flaws you wouldn’t necessarily see. Whereas when you’re reading quite a few essays the overall fluency factors in more highly than if you were going to get really stuck into looking at criteria. When I first marked I didn’t see there was any understanding just the bad spelling and grammar, even though we only give 10% to spelling. This must happen a lot and they [the students] end up with the wrong message.

It’s almost like a bias. Spelling on our marking criteria sheets is in a separate section. It’s only a few points in actual fact. This way we are forced us to stick to the important criteria and they [the students] get more feedback on which bits they are good at and those they are not.

Reframing Practices

Through these shared analyses teachers were able to reframe their assessment practices and to question how they provided feedback to students so it connected to learning. For example, teachers across teams agreed upon criteria for examining various writing genres and began to construct rubrics and to design various collaborative investigations focused on pedagogy. Examples:

- How can we improve feedback & dialogue between students and teachers?
- How do teacher questions support student learning?
- Are the criteria for judging student performance made explicit to students? To teachers?
- What teaching scaffolds are most effective in supporting student learning?
- Are links made with students’ prior knowledge made explicit?

Teachers talked frequently about the importance of connecting theory to their practice.

I really try to think about what’s behind my teaching now - to understand the theory. It’s not just about the teaching like how to teach argument but it’s understanding how students learn to write and what they think about my teaching.

The strong theoretical base for the pedagogical approaches investigated by the teachers increased the chance that there would be clear evidence of success. Student improvement was confirmed by literacy testing and linked to teachers’ professional learning (Deppeler, 2006). As evidence regarding student participation and learning was also integral to the work of the teachers, any changes in student performance were readily apparent as part of the teaching learning process. One of the most important themes throughout teacher discussions of the evidence of student improvement was that teaching had influenced the learning of the lower performing students. This, in turn, allowed teachers to change their expectations for these students. Teachers’ comments

reflect a shift in focus to what students ‘can do’ rather than what they cannot. The following quote is typical of the many teachers who reported being surprised by student improvement:

After I had completed my first assignment and observed the students and collected samples and actually reflected on that [data] I was actually getting such a lot out of it (...) and seeing things and changing things that I had not even contemplated before. I found out there is a better way to do things. I had never interviewed kids or found out what they thought about a particular piece of work, I just couldn't believe what they could achieve!

There was also a noticeable valuing of the student’s contribution as a source of data. Assessment practices that emphasised teacher-student interaction became common. For example:

- Interviewing
- Questioning
- Feedback
- Sharing criteria & student construction of rubrics
- Peer and self-assessment practices

Collaboration Enhances Professional Learning

Collaboration was an important influence and catalyst for professional learning:

1. Teachers’ individual investigations were informed by literacy theory and responded to the particular goals of each team but were reframed in light of the professional experiences of members of each team, and the broader curriculum approaches in each context.
2. Collaborative discussion and analysis of evidence to understand student learning enabled their construction of new knowledge and increased their tolerance for uncertainty.
3. Increased opportunities for teachers to access information, alternative views and to engage with peers and other professionals changed not only what teachers noticed but also how they interpreted events. Teachers identified that the refinement of their investigations was enhanced because of the number of teachers working towards similar goals in CI teams in and across school sites.
4. Collaboration strengthened relationships & built respect and understanding for differences (professional learning community). As teachers collaborated in more than one investigation, they became increasingly more willing to observe and teach in one another’s classrooms. While collaborative discussion supported learning so, too, did learning to collaborate support collaborative discussion.

With most PD you go off and you might get excited at the time but when you get back to school – it never seems to go anywhere. Even with the best of intentions you just get caught up in other things. With LINC we’ve got a team to keep the momentum up and knowing it will benefit the school. We have our pride too. Knowing our work is going to be shared with the other schools.

Conditions that Enhance Professional Learning

A number of conditions in our approach appear to have enhanced teachers’ professional learning:

1. University credit - Teachers’ believed this fully funded opportunity provided an incentive, imposed an obligation and the responsibility to complete their collaborative investigations and was essential for motivating their initial participation and maintaining the quality of their work.

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2. School Leadership - School leaders increased opportunities for collaboration by modifying the timetable and providing teacher release and generally promoted the work of the team and a culture of inquiry throughout the school (Deppeler, 2006).
3. University flexibility & support - Our flexibility in making and legitimising a number of changes in response to teachers' requests and scaffolded support was perceived to be critical in maintaining their participation and commitment.

Our social constructivist view of learning emphasised the importance of the teachers' role in supporting student learning and involved us in modelling this same approach in our support for teachers' learning of CI. While most teachers benefited from this approach to become increasingly confident and independent in engaging in CI to understand the process of teaching and learning, one or two teachers in each of the teams remained reliant upon their colleagues and us for support. It is not clear whether these teachers needed more time to engage confidently and independently with the inquiry process. Attempting to purposefully and actively connect with the diversity of teachers in these cohorts created challenges in negotiating the tension between collaboration and individual submission of work and in rethinking what structures might best reward and support professional learning.

Discussion

Many barriers to the participation and learning of students appeared to stem from teachers' misplaced assumptions about what some students can and cannot do and how best to teach them. Teachers in these schools have begun to deal with students previously conceived as 'problematic' as if they were no different from other students. After an initial period of uncertainty, teachers were able to move to more collaborative and systematic approaches to reshape and generate new practices. Professional learning is highly complex but appears to flourish with a combination of expert input supported by collaborative and evidence-informed investigation and critical discussion. Central to these activities was the development of a common language that enabled professional conversations and was key to advancing teachers' understanding and inquiries. It also appears that teachers' understanding of student learning and diversity cannot be easily separated from their understanding of pedagogy. Discussion about student learning and teaching practices occurred along with discussion about theories of literacy. Similarly, in collecting and engaging with evidence in order to analyse their literacy practices, teachers questioned the beliefs and assumptions they held about students which underpinned these practices. As teachers became more capable in using inquiry, they became more capable and confident in developing pedagogy in teaching literacy and in reframing assessment practices. Understanding what students needed to learn and how expertise developed had positive effects on students' achievement. One important finding from our work is that teachers' learning in relation to inquiry and collaboration develops over time. Teachers therefore require long-term opportunities to apply tools of inquiry to complex problems, to build trust and collaborative skills and to become engaged with theories and research-based practices. This process appears to be enhanced by simultaneous attention to conditions that provide opportunities for collaboration, access to resources and incentives and that emphasise teacher responsibility for enacting and completing research. Our particular approach to CI is undoubtedly demanding in terms of time and financial resources and therefore may be impractical in other contexts. More fundamentally our findings generate questions about the role of universities in partnerships that support teachers' professional learning. Consistent with previous research, our initial precepts appear to be well founded. A contextualised approach that actively involves teachers and academics as partners in CI can promote teacher and student learning. This is in contrast to the

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‘expert’ approach in which academics deliver short-term sequences of pre-determined content to teachers as passive recipients. However, it is likely that every partnership arrangement will need modification in order to respond to the contexts of individual schools. Meeting this challenge will require flexibility and restructuring of academic practices so that they support partnerships and collaborative inquiry as a long-term goal and as part of university culture.

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ⁱ This paper is an abridged version of the chapter Deppeler, J. (In Press Accepted October, 2006) Collaborative inquiry for professional learning, in A. Berry, A. Clemens, & A. Kostogriz (Eds.), *Professionalism, identities and practice: Changing perspectives* Sense Publishers.

ⁱⁱ The Learning in Networking Communities (LINC) project is a research and professional development partnership between the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne and Monash University (2001 – 2005). The study was partially supported by the Australian Research Council of Research Strategic Partnership Industry Research Training (ARC-SPIRT) scheme (2001-2003). The Catholic Education Office, Victoria (CECV) provided funding in support of the research in their role as the industry partner in the ARC-SPIRT scheme. The CECV also provided the funding to support the teachers participation in postgraduate studies at Monash University, which has made this project possible (2001-2005).

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