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**School based practitioner enquiry as stepping stones to change**

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**Abstract:**

With increasing recognition of the importance of principles of adult learning in the shaping of early childhood centres and schools as learning communities, practitioner enquiry is being pursued as a valuable piece of the pedagogical puzzle. Within a socio-constructivist frame, case studies of practitioner enquiry sites are useful tools in enabling educational communities to understand more about the processes which support the effective adaptation and sustenance of practitioner enquiry projects.

This collaborative pilot study used the resources and expertise of a Catholic Education Office (CEO Sydney Archdiocese) in conjunction with the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University (IEC) to simultaneously implement and study a cycle of classroom-based professional learning initiatives. As facilitators in the educational change process, the university-based research team investigated its own work in similar fashion to the action research cycles being advocated for school based teams.

While recognising that learning in the early years is fundamental to later schooling success and employment opportunity, educational change initiatives have traditionally been content-driven (eg literacy and numeracy programs) rather than focusing on teachers themselves. Given the framework and possibilities offered by practitioner enquiry, however, professionalism grows through the cyclical investigations of a supported learning community and becomes visible.

In 2008, teachers from thirteen schools used practitioner enquiry methods to investigate questions of pedagogy related to CEO priorities and children's wellbeing. This research is subsequently having a significant impact on teaching policies and practices throughout the Sydney region. This initiative is significant in that it increases teacher empowerment and improved practice in teaching teams in pilot schools. Key staff at the CEO have identified the significance of this research for them in terms of the potential it offers to explore systemic documents (*The Learning Framework* and *The Learner in the Early Years of Primary School*) in practice. Findings also indicate that the roles of employer and university facilitators are critical to professional learning through these change processes.

This research is enabling the project team to synthesize and codify practices and procedures associated with practitioner enquiry in order to strengthen the knowledge base and to enable these procedures to be enacted on a larger scale. Recommendations are made for further research into the use of practitioner enquiry to support systemic change.

**Introduction:**

With increasing recognition of the importance of principles of adult learning in the shaping of schools as learning communities, practitioner enquiry is being pursued as a valuable piece of the pedagogical puzzle. Within a socio-constructivist frame, case studies of practitioner enquiry sites enable educational communities to understand more about the processes which

support the effective adaptation and sustenance of practitioner enquiry projects (Fleet, Patterson & McCauley, 2009). This paper reports on a pilot study conducted to investigate the use of practitioner enquiry in educational change processes. Goodfellow (2005, p.48) defines practitioner enquiry as “systematic inquiry-based efforts directed towards creating and extending professional knowledge and associated understanding of professional practice”.

Professional learning in education is ongoing, with support being a prime responsibility of employers and systemic providers. The conceptual opportunities provided through transformative approaches enabling learning through participation have become apparent through the work of scholars such as Rogoff, Matusov & White (1996).

In its *Learning Framework discussion paper*, the CEO writes that “This time of profound change invites us to revisit the foundation of our educational philosophy, our belief about the purpose of schooling and the implications for learning and teaching”. To meet the challenges of these complex community expectations and unknown futures, schools must engage in ongoing change processes (Levin & Fullan, 2008). Literature about systemic change and adult learning makes it abundantly clear that change of this nature cannot be imposed or mandated; it needs to be embedded in the culture of an educational system. Processes for that change momentum, however, lack transparency and continue to be problematic.

#### **Context: Developing the research collaboration:**

In 2008, colleagues from the IEC and the Early Learning Committee from the CEO developed a collaboration to foreground appropriate and effective early childhood practices in the first years of school. That initiative has evolved into a formal research process, both supporting teachers at the local level and informing the knowledge base of educational change. The IEC team have worked as ‘researcher facilitators’, both assisting in teaching practitioner enquiry processes and investigating the processes as they unfold.

The CEO Archdiocese of Sydney extends across the greater Sydney region. The Central Office (in Leichhardt) has key curriculum officers who inform policy changes through engagement and professional discourse with regional Consultants and Advisors. The CEO, amongst other roles, is responsible for 112 primary schools across three regions. Consultants support Principals in their role and Advisors provide advice and support to classroom teachers in relation to varying curriculum areas, in this case, initiated through the Central Office. The CEO involves stakeholders in decision-making processes and sets clear and achievable goals to realise a shared vision grounded in a values-based framework. Strategies to achieve this include:

- developing shared understandings of quality pedagogical approaches for early learners;
- using research data to inform professional practice;
- emphasising the importance of the principal as the ‘head teacher’;
- acknowledging the power of effective learning communities in achieving educational change;
- reviewing and evaluating programs, and school and system processes.

Interest in this form of systemic transformation within the CEO builds on success of the 2006 Professional Enquiry Project in the ACT (Fleet and Patterson, 2007) in which owners, directors and staff from three child care centres investigated their practice in an enquiry cycle developed from similar projects in South Australia (Fleet and Winter, 2004). These enquiry cycles included workshop sessions with stories of practice from teachers as well as presentations related to research processes and principles of early childhood pedagogy. This work also built on the *Transition to School Project* (De Gioia & Hayden, 2005) which

investigated issues and practices for families, staff and children, highlighting the importance of the early years.

### **Literature review:**

Professional literature over decades has demonstrated that teachers are the key variable in student success at school, whether that success is defined in terms of academic outcomes, broader social goals or longer term dispositions to learning and community participation (Murnane, 1975; Hanushek, 1986; Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 1998; Levin, 2007; Levin & Fullan, 2008). Research findings indicate clearly (Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 1998; Levin, 2007) that teachers are the key component in education, in optimising children's experience, supporting learning and engagement, providing teaching and creating enriching environments; and that their voices are a valuable component in researching change (Rathgen, 2006). Thus change research is needed in contexts seeking to strengthen social capital, particularly in the first years of school. Unfortunately, there is little relevant research to support Australian educational systems in developing change beyond a few "islands of improvement" (Rusch, 2005).

The use of practitioner enquiry as a key component of sustainable systemic change reflects an understanding of adult learning and systemic complexity, including the resistance of bureaucracies to institutional change. Practitioner enquiry includes pursuit of agency and empowerment. This form of research emerged from traditions of action research (eg Mills, 2000; Stringer, 1999), the acknowledgement of teachers as learners (Groundwater-Smith, Ewing & Le Cornu, 2007), and the importance of practitioner voice in engaged educational improvement (eg Fleer & Kennedy, 2006, Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998). Practitioner enquiry projects recognize principles of adult learning, including: building on learner strengths; engaging participants in researching relevant content related to their own practices; enabling peer support; avoiding confrontation, but challenging counter productive behaviours; and encouraging participation through a range of strategies (Fleet & Patterson, 2007). These components support "the power of collaborative research in teachers' professional development" (Potter, 2001, p.8).

*The term 'enquiry' describes a situation where there is curiosity and a desire to find something out by exploration, investigation and research. Enquiries involve questions being raised, challenges to thinking and problem-solving activities.*  
(De Boo, 1999, p.2)

Goodfellow and Hedges (2007, p.188) state that practitioner enquiry is "seen to be potentially transformative in its capacity to lead to better understandings and improved practices". Practitioner enquiry empowers participants through both research skill acquisition and knowledge formation in a local context. It is powerful in that, cycles of investigation supported by facilitators can alert participants to problematic issues in professional practice, and then develop skills to address those concerns. Furthermore, it can develop school leaders able to effectively sustain educational change.

*Teacher research is designed by practitioners to seek practical solutions to issues and problems in their professional...lives...it stems from teachers' own questions about and reflections on their every day classroom practices.*  
(Stremmel, 2002, p.65)

The model of practitioner enquiry chosen to scaffold this initiative includes the use of a spiralling format in which ideas are introduced in a variety of ways and subsequently revisited for increasing clarity. This enables the introduction of ideas over an extended period of time to promote depth of understanding, both within and across schools. It enables potentially confronting ideas to percolate, as the process can be as challenging for school-based leaders

as it is for teachers. In addition, the practitioner enquiry model highlights strengths of participants while engaging in relevant situationally-based content enabling peer support through paired investigations.

### **Development of a learning community**

The pilot project and related research (in South Australia and the ACT) suggests that ‘buddy groups’ of practitioners who work together in a continuous spiral of input, action, and reflection generate a learning culture. Rather than individuals working in isolation, this development of a learning community (Wenger, 1999) leads to active engagement in issues of immediate concern.

There is clear support in the general educational change literature for broadly based innovations that are led by researching facilitators with relevant field-based recognition and expertise (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2006; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Fullan, 2008). In this pilot project, the researcher facilitators created a situation where the ‘content’ being delivered was framed to connect with the participants’ concerns.

The conceptualisation of professional empowerment in this project involved an infrastructure that supported regular gatherings of staff from a number of schools, meetings with all staff in a single school, departmental staff teams or grade meetings, and small buddy groups. Components of the collaborative enquiry process included an introduction to the concepts of practitioner enquiry and inspiration to engage with the process, what might be called ‘developing ownership’. Participants were encouraged to be open-minded and persistent while forming (and continuing to refine) a project question related to their professional practice and trialling forms of data collection, both as individuals and with teaching teams or a project ‘buddy’. The sequence then moved to

- collaborative analysis in a supportive team (seeking patterns and implications),
- trialling and reflecting on adaptations,
- celebrating learning and achievement, and
- beginning the cycle again!

These opportunities for professional exchange were designed to support individual agency within sustainable organisational change frameworks. The processes depended on locally relevant data collection and analysis, enabling participants to grow as researchers of their own practice by working in collaborative teams. Similar to approaches to professional learning described by Albrecht and Engel (2007), this thinking reflects Jones and Nimmo’s admonition that: “In a changing and diverse world, traditional models of a sole source of knowledge and power cannot be effective in sustaining a viable society...teachers need to engage in continuous dialogue with each other and with students” (1999, p.6). Through talking, thinking, listening, and reflecting, individuals access data from their own experience and co-construct knowledge.

### **Methodology:**

This research is situated within a socio-constructivist paradigm which sees knowledge as socially constructed (Fleer & Kennedy, 2006; Goodfellow & Hedges, 2007). It values the investigation of a case for organisational data, the use of teachers’ voice for insight into lived experience, and constant comparative strategies for generating tabularised representations of key findings (Yates, 2004). Ethical research practice was recognised throughout, both in terms of adherence to university protocols, and in recognizing the particular issues associated with these methodologies (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007).

This is a mixed-methods study as it seeks to be informed through multiple approaches (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). There is, however, a strong reliance on qualitative approaches to address the following pilot project goals:

- 1) to build teacher capacity in the early years of school by developing a model of systemic change grounded in practitioner enquiry,
- 2) to identify factors that assist in developing curriculum leadership,
- 3) to inform systemic change processes throughout the [regional system].

This pilot project began in late 2007. Principals submitted an expression of interest to the Central Office which identified key staff to be involved. Thirteen school principals were then asked to engage a team of people in the project, including staff with a range of responsibilities - such as the principal or assistant principal, an early Stage 1, and a Stage 1 teacher (approximately equating the first three years of primary schooling), and a specialist teacher who worked across all grades.

A core group of approximately 60 participants attended most project events, including 14 principals and/or assistant principals, 36 classroom teachers, and 7 specialist teachers (eg reading recovery and special education). In addition to school staff, local consultants and advisers attended project events whenever possible, along with three key staff from the CEO Archdiocesan Head Office.

Although these figures give an overall picture, individuals participated at different levels over the life of the project. As a number of project events were held outside working hours, family responsibilities and significant school commitments meant that some staff were unable to attend all sessions. Staff changes also meant that there was some fluctuation in attendance: the participants in the first session were not necessarily the same staff present at the final session.

#### **Pilot study structure and data gathering techniques:**

In this study, Franceyn was the coordinator of the initiative for the CEO Early Learning Committee while Alma, Catherine and Katey were university-based planners and facilitators. Kate is responsible for Primary Curriculum in the Archdiocese. The CEO invited IEC to assist in supporting a process to inform the school community and re-energise staff, particularly those working in the early years. Ideas from Reggio Emilia had been seen as a useful provocation. Following discussion, it was agreed to use a practitioner enquiry approach, and to research the practitioner enquiry processes themselves as well as supporting school staff in investigating their own practices.

Systematic engagement in enquiry over time is a powerful model for shaping professional learning communities. Practitioner enquiry was chosen as the frame for this project to empower participants through gaining both research skills and knowledge formation in a local context. One of the selection criteria for being included in the project was commitment to frame a question that would lead educators to explore their educational practices with children. An underlying assumption is that responding to principles of early childhood practice leads to improved wellbeing, engagement and educational outcomes for children. The model of professional growth used in the pilot study included a continuous spiral of input, action and reflection, as a large group, in staff teams, and at classroom level. Participants gathered and analysed data to investigate issues of concern, planned initiatives, maintained professional reflective journals, and continued to collect and analyse more data as part of the investigative process. The 'group' not only contributed to its own learning through synergies of circumstance and collective energy, but had the potential of evolving into a critical mass of people able to create a local culture and effect sustainable enquiry.

A mix of large and small group sessions were provided for participants to become engaged in and supported through their investigations. All participants were invited to an introductory

twilight session which introduced them to practitioner enquiry. Participants began the process of reflecting on the following: What concerns do I have about my practice? What data do we have and what questions does this information help to illuminate? What action have we tried in response to our data? What evidence can be reported as a result of this enquiry? Large group sessions included input from the CEO and IEC including research articles and provocations offered as discussion starters and stepping stones to adult intellectual engagement. This also enabled consideration of the relationship of the investigations to the *Learning Framework* (systemic documentation).

Small group sessions held in regional locations enabled participants to report on progress. They provided opportunities to talk through participants' focus questions and data gathering processes with 'critical friends' in a supportive environment. In a well-argued review of the literature, Borka (2004) notes that the development of learning communities to support teachers is complex and time-consuming, yet "challenging conversations about teaching" have been identified as key to the success of such communities. This resonates with Canadian research (Levin, 2007) in which schools are recognised as ecologies in complex political environments, dependent on support for creating respected sustainable learning communities.

Data were gathered from individual participants involved in the study via surveys, visual representations, and workshop session feedback. Initial interviews were held with principals, consultants, central office staff attached to the project and CEO advisers, to ascertain their thoughts about practitioner enquiry and how they perceived the project unfolding.

#### **Data analysis strategies:**

Multiple forms of data analysis were employed to contribute richly textured outcomes. For example, visual representations of initial engagement (drawings of self in relation to embarking on the project) were coded thematically as well as using techniques from arts-informed enquiry (Cole, Neilsen, Knowles, & Luciani, 2004; Fleet, 2008). Similarly, broad spectrum coding identified major themes for revisiting through focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Analysis sought patterns of response to inform the shaping of propositions related to models of systemic change.

Data were coded into themes derived from the literature pertaining to practitioner enquiry and study goals. Data analysis enabled examination of commonalities and differences in experiences throughout the process. In addition, approximately half the data collected from interviews, surveys, reflections from attendance at workshop sessions and participant journaling was analysed with the assistance of QSR NVivo 8 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2007) a computer program designed to assist in qualitative research and analysis. The researchers have chosen to use NVivo 8 due to the program's purposeful and ordered handling of data (St John & Johnson, 2000), replacing manual tasks associated with qualitative research. It allows for text boundaries to be established and provides a swift alternative for coding and retrieving data in a systematic manner.

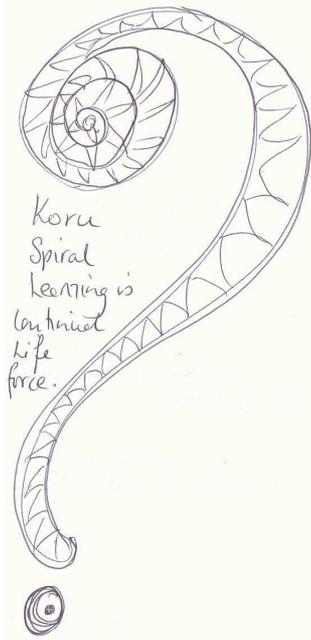
#### **Findings:**

The positive outcomes of the project were evident in a number of ways. Most participants were keen about the project and willingly attended workshop sessions. The progress report (Fleet, DeGioia & Patterson, 2008) states that:

For some teachers, the project enabled them to re-think significant concepts that they knew from their professional knowledge. Concepts related to the unique characteristics of young learners (such as the need for hands-on experiences) were reinforced through practical experience in their classrooms. For example, one teacher noted that: "*Children definitely need time for deep learning to occur.*" Another commented that she now understood that "*Children, especially boys, seemed to be*

*more engaged with concrete materials.*” Further, the teachers who had focused on the development of social skills explained that *“Positive relationships really need to be modeled and taught to children ... they need to practice positive behaviours to have positive relationships”*. One participant said that by focusing on social skills, she had *“learned many new strategies to overcome emotional and relationship issues”*.

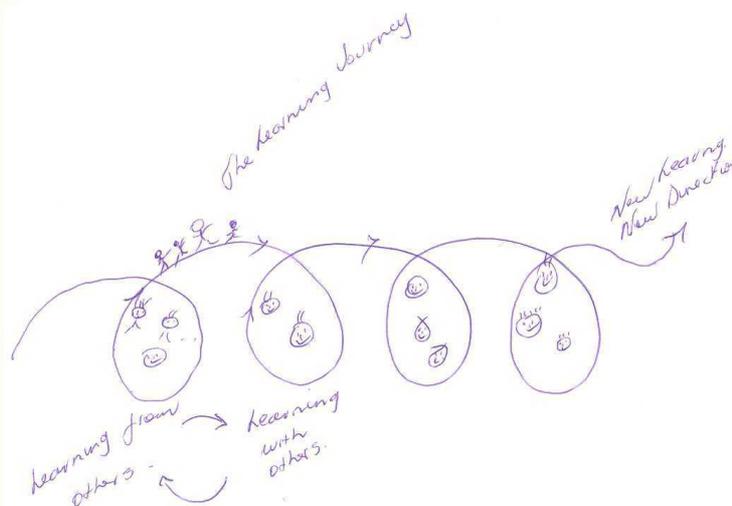
Early in the project, people were invited to create visual representations of their participation. These were analysed by the research team, collated and shared at a subsequent workshop.



The representations were categorised into seven broad groups: those in which the metaphors were interpreted as representing an expectation of growth, seeking keys to knowledge, a sense of the unknown, open-ness to possibility, focus on pedagogy, school focus and a conception of the project as a journey. A few samples are included to give the flavour of the responses.

The level of professional growth in individual participants was exciting to observe. One teacher noted that she had learned: *“That after many years of teaching, change is so important, not just to cater for the current generation of children, but to feel fresh and inspired as a teacher.”*

The project also gave teachers an opportunity to learn more about the children in their classrooms. There was a renewed focus on data gathering through a range of strategies including teacher observations, surveys of children, video footage and photographs of children engaged in learning, work samples and discussions. These strategies often enabled teachers to see an unexpected aspect of children.



One teacher said she now *“knew more about her children’s likes and dislikes which helped me reorganize the way I teach some students.”* Another noted that *“As a*

*teacher I can learn so much quickly about my students from observing them in play situations.*" In a similar way, another teacher noted that *"observing who the children play with and how they play"* provided insights into personal strengths and capabilities. This acknowledgement of children's strengths was evident in other comments about the project. For example: *"Children want to make discoveries for themselves. They are very capable ... and this project has allowed them to think about thinking (meta-cognition)."* Or as another teacher explained her new understanding: *"Students have an advanced ability to work well with others when engaged in activities that are meaningful for them."*

Systematic inquiry enabled participants to explore questions such as 'How can the classroom environment be used to promote developmental play and enhance teaching and learning?', 'How does the explicit teaching of social skills further equip students' capacity to learn?' 'How can I better engage children in creative and meaningful learning experiences?' 'How do cooperative grouping techniques improve student outcomes? A summary of the research questions is in the Appendix.

As participants gathered data and discussed their findings at regular meetings there was a growing sense of colleagues working together to improve outcomes for children and their families. In particular, many participants found that having a 'buddy' at their school provided them with *"regular opportunities to discuss ideas and concerns"*. The in-school buddy was often a source of encouragement and support, and the collaboration enabled participants to share ideas and resources.

Positive outcomes for children were noted. Changes in daily practice occurred as participants reflected on their work and endeavoured to improve experiences for children. As one teacher said: *"The children's social and emotional skills have improved not only in the classroom, but also during unstructured play situations, including the playground."* Another noted: *"We were amazed at the attention and focus the children showed at each learning centre and how they were willing to continue their learning."*

The overwhelming success of the final celebration evening in November demonstrated the pride and achievement experienced by the participants. Participants had prepared storyboards that attractively highlighted the processes involved in answering their research questions. In addition, selected participants made formal presentations that illustrated the depth of knowledge and understanding of children that had been developed through the project. During the evening, it became evident that a number of staff were seeing themselves as researchers and some were taking their first steps in making public presentations about their work.

At the end of the pilot study the following senior staff participants were invited to participate in interviews:

- principals or assistant principals (n = 10)
- consultants (n = 3) and Advisers (n = 3)
- key staff from CEO Central Office (n = 2)

When asked what they were particularly pleased about, these senior leaders overwhelmingly responded in terms of the learning and collaboration of the teachers in the project. They noted the shift in teacher thinking and classroom pedagogy and the positive discussion that resulted during the process. For example, one person commented that, *"Initially the teacher changed the learning space and then the children started changing the learning spaces. Then the children started directing what learning would happen in the space"* and another stated *"I think the teachers have been open to learn from each other, so there's been a real collaborative approach. They've said that having time to sit together and reflect out of their busy days, that's really important."*

One of the school executive staff members noted that “I wasn’t surprised about their willingness to do any of it, but what I was surprised about was how animated they became about it. The conversation, there were many, many conversations, even informal conversations about what so and so did.” Another senior school person commented “What pleased me more than anything was that the teachers became the driving force and they were excited about it.” In response to the process itself, there was the comment that “I guess the flexibility which was good because in reality until you actually do start to try putting something in to process you don’t know if it’s going to work,” although the reverse of that perspective was the opinion that “This is a slow way of getting there.”

When asked about what might have been done differently, several of the senior staff expressed the need for greater support in and clarification of their roles in the process: “*That role of the facilitator. I don’t think I was very clear on that at the beginning. That is vital. I think the role of a facilitator – I’d like to see that improve.*” One of the results of this lack of role clarity became evident in a principal’s comment that “*I just think there needed to be a little bit more contact.... I just think that would have been important. Someone to come and visit the school and say this is what’s going on. How are you going with it? Just spend a bit of time, an hour or so, just to keep tabs and connect with people.*” There were also inevitable differences in points of view about the desirable frequency and length of meetings and discussion sessions.

In summarising the organization’s perceptions of the pilot project, senior CEO colleagues indicated that the project

*... enabled the promotion of the early learner in the primary school environment, creating an understanding that all learners are powerful! Further, the project promotes teachers as researchers, challenging and supporting risk-taking as a way of ensuring that learning is the focus of our moral purpose.*

*The collaborative partnership ... has been instrumental in challenging the traditional modes of pedagogy evidenced in many classrooms to assist teachers and leaders adapt to contemporary learning practices of the twenty first century. The incorporation of reflective practice has ensured that teachers and leaders are continuously in a cycle of reflection focused on the learners in the context of their school.*

Finally, from the perspective of researcher facilitators, the project afforded an opportunity to extend ongoing research into the impact of educational change. This outcome became increasingly evident as the project continued over time and participants grew more confident in their relationships across organisations. Thus, as indicated by the literature (eg Newell, 1996; Stremmel, 2002), practitioner enquiry has been further justified as a research frame which improves local practice, strengthens practitioners and contributes to the knowledge base. It is also established as a productive site for research into its relevant processes.

### **Analysis:**

This research is significant as it provides detailed information about innovation processes. The research aimed to establish that practitioner enquiry enables professionalism to grow in the context of cyclical investigations in a supported learning community. The success of the pilot study inspired what McLaughlin and Mitra (2001) refer to as “*Growing the capacity of classrooms, schools and districts to see it through*”, that is, to sustain an innovation on an increasing scale. “*Going to scale requires support not only for sustaining existing practices, but for broadening the reach of reform at multiple levels of the system....*” (p.314-315).

While acknowledging that teachers are key, they cannot ‘improve’ through good intentions alone. Research clearly indicates the importance of a range of factors, including “a

knowledgeable supportive principal”, “the limits of teacher-centric practices” and the challenges of sustaining change while “going to scale” (McLaughlin and Mitra, 2001, pp.311, 314). Infrastructure and employer commitment become critical.

This project’s philosophical commitment to differential framing dependent on local contexts distinguishes this work from other apparently similar programs. With the support of external facilitators, the regional nature of the project engaged schools in voluntarily engaging in site-specific practitioner enquiry processes. Participants were empowered through the invitation to choose their own topic for investigation and relevant data collection processes. With an element of professional risk-taking, this strengths-based model of adult learning led to the development of learning communities where participants engaged in learning- focussed dialogue and the exchange of ideas. This process of collegial support and encouragement resulted in increased professional confidence and competence.

Another significant innovation in this work is the expectation that people usually considered to be managing change from a distance, are conceptualized as key leaders through modelling of the same enquiry processes as those used by class-based teachers. The consultants and principals, resource teachers and curriculum advisers, all participated in choosing and investigating a question related to personally relevant professional practice, working alongside a buddy for collegial support with access to critical friends for challenge and extension. They shared in workshop sessions and were thus authentic participants in the end of year showcase and celebration, which both affirmed participants and inspired colleagues.

The regular pattern of workshop sessions were key for

- establishing membership of a professional learning community
- overcoming classroom isolation
- offering knowledge and skills related to professional enquiry and data analysis
- providing time for engagement with issues of professional practice
- encouraging professional reflection and sharing inspiration from examples of excellence.

These outcomes reflected Stringer’s claims that ‘community-based’ participatory inquiry reflects the values of its community, involving those engaged with ‘the problem’ under study, in ways that are democratic, equitable, liberating and life enhancing (1999, p10). A socio constructivist orientation was the foundation of this enabling framework.

The research enabled depth of analysis of the participants’ strategies in investigating their own practice and outcomes in terms of teacher learning, children’s wellbeing and systemic process factors. The pilot study indicated clearly that the active participation of a senior school leader in the enquiry process, not just in scaffolding teacher investigations but in pursuing a personal professional research agenda, related strongly to the success of change initiatives. This study was dependent upon teachers, principals and associated key staff being able to implement practitioner enquiry in their workplace. The process also requires time away from busy lives in classroom and offices to research, reflect and analyse data relevant to experience. In working towards a values-based transformational culture (Blackmore, 1999), it was important for the research facilitators to work closely with the teachers researching in classroom settings and to build trust. Teachers in schools may choose research areas which are unfamiliar to them and appreciate support in terms of early childhood philosophy or strategies.

Previous research into the processes of practitioner enquiry has made clear that insightful local advocates are essential for the success of the process; initiatives can flounder from either lack of senior level support or a ground level (centre or classroom-based) enthusiast (Fleet & Patterson, 2001). The ways in which this influence is evidenced varies according to context.

For example, the Project Advisory team that included members of the CEO Early Learning committee was key in implementing the project processes. Discussions in 2008 clarified how communication could be strengthened with this group and with school senior staff, to support facilitation processes. As Ponte (2002, p.414) noted, *“the data show that the facilitators determined the gains for the teachers to a large extent”*. Ponte goes on to say that the facilitator role was more than a critical friend responding mainly after the event, but their facilitation was more effective when they “took a pro-active role in assisting teachers as they actually carried out the action research” (p.415). While practitioner enquiry has a slightly different configuration from classic action research, this observation seems germane to this project.

The next phase of this project will unfold over three years building on the pilot study and will involve new schools (and participants) entering the study annually over a three year period. The pilot study participants were invited to continue their commitment to site-specific research into 2009 as a continuing cohort, whilst involving additional teachers from those schools (referred to as next door neighbours, or NdN). Rolling out the study in this manner is expected to strengthen a foundation that evolves stronger practice, rather than leaving single cohorts to pursue innovation without systemic support or a role in nurturing newcomers. The introduction of CEO based facilitators to support continuing schools is integral to identifying the process of systemic change. These employer- supported change agents have the potential to shape sustainability in ways not possible to outside facilitators. The descriptions and modeling of these roles will be a useful component in identification of core change elements.

### **Conclusions:**

Existing research on educational change indicates that, once the centrality of the teacher is acknowledged, principals and systemic infrastructure are key to quality improvement. This pilot study aimed to unpack that claim with relation to the first years of school within one major educational system.

A logical conclusion to this study is the recommendation that the study be built upon in order to *Identify factors that support /constrain educational change in a major educational sector*. Of particular importance here would be the interviews of facilitators and key personnel at the commencement and end of each year. Ideally, data would also be gathered from facilitators’ journals, therefore capturing their experiences of practitioner enquiry from a facilitator perspective. Comparisons between experiences will inform this goal and identify a process for facilitators working with future groups.

This applied research is innovative due to its structure as a collaborative study with a focus on embedded cycles of practitioner enquiry as the vehicle for systemic improvement. The introduction of a “Next door Neighbour” program will involve participating teachers and school leaders in mentoring other members of their local school community. McLaughlin and Mitra (2001) refer to “Corridors of practice” (p.316) in that children benefit from a sequence of teachers who have engaged with similar professional learning opportunities. These findings lead credence to the Next-door Neighbour program concept being introduced here. Researching the elements of this practitioner enquiry process will enable knowledge generation to inform policy decisions at both school and system level. The ‘Corridors of practice’ (McLaughlin and Mitra, 2001, p.316) goal has already been demonstrated as a powerful metaphor for this work. Of seven core schools contributing to the next phase of the project, (referred to as NdN-next door neighbour leaders), half have already engaged teachers beyond the immediate participants including those teaching children beyond the early years of school.

This “approach to research clearly demonstrates how working in partnership with schools opens up the possibilities for teachers to use initiatives and opportunities in ways that can be

more advantageous and beneficial to the local school community than could realistically be possible by simply implementing bureaucratically mandated 'reform'." (Loughran, 1999, p.6). In addition, while the university staff were aware of key components in the project, the differential understandings of early childhood principles and practices will need to be more strongly addressed in 2009.

The model of practitioner enquiry chosen to scaffold this initiative has several key ingredients including the use of a spiralling format in which ideas are introduced in a variety of ways and subsequently revisited for increasing clarity. This enables the introduction of ideas over an extended period of time to promote depth of understanding, both within and across schools. It also enables potentially confronting ideas to percolate, as the process can be as confronting for school-based facilitators and leaders as it is for teachers. In addition, the practitioner enquiry model highlights strengths of participants while engaging in relevant situationally-based content enabling peer support through paired investigations.

While the effects of practitioner enquiry work are evidenced in outcomes for children, the focus of this study is on educators- the classroom teachers, specialists and administrators who have engaged in this form of professional learning as part of their commitment to a community of learners. This focus reflects research findings that indicate clearly (Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 1998; Levin, 2007) that teachers are the key component in education, in optimizing children's experience, supporting learning and engagement, providing teaching and creating enriching environments. Therefore in scaffolding excellence, ongoing, respectful, sustainable professional learning opportunities are essential.

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**Notes:**

1. 'enquiry' and 'inquiry' are treated as synonymous, as both are used equally in the literature; as one author uses *enquiry* and the case study was constructed with *inquiry*, both spellings have been maintained

**Appendix:**

**Learning environments (indoor/outdoor)**

Seven participants from five schools focused on the role the indoor and outdoor learning environment can play in enhancing children's thinking, learning and social skills. The use of classroom space was one aspect of interest.

*Sample question: How can the classroom environment be organised to enhance learning and to encourage sustained engagement?*

**Engagement in learning**

Fifteen participants from nine schools questioned how to engage Early Stage 1 and Stage 1 students in meaningful, challenging and creative learning experiences. Several participants were interested in the role hands-on, play-based learning and student grouping has on student engagement. Engaging all learners, including early finishers, boys and the most able students, was also of interest.

*Sample question: How can we better engage all Early Stage 1/Stage 1 students in challenging and creative learning experiences which will maximise learning?*

**Self-efficacy and/or independent learners and/or resilience**

Six participants from five schools researched how to support students to have high self-efficacy and be more resilient in their learning. Encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning was also an area of research.

*Sample question: What strategies can I implement and how can I create an environment that encourages students to have high self-efficacy and be more independent in their learning?*

**Social and emotional**

Eight participants from three schools focused on the development of social and emotional skills and its impact on children as learners. Guiding children's behaviour was also of interest.

*Sample question: How does the development of social and emotional skills and competencies enhance learning?*

**The early learner and pedagogical change**

One participant and two consultants were interested in pedagogical change through the practitioner enquiry process and what early learning would look like over time.

*Sample question: How can pedagogical change occur and what does early learning look like over time?*

**Learning and technology**

Two participants from two schools researched the role technology can play in enhancing student's skills.

*Sample question: How can the use of technology assess and assist non-writers in the development of confidence, imagination, verbal language and IT skills?*

**Observation and assessment**

Two participants from two schools focused their research on forms of assessment which are meaningful and accessible.

*Sample question: Which forms of documentation and assessment are easily incorporated into daily use and provide meaningful information of student acquisition?*