



2012 Principal's Sabbatical Report

Title: Professional Learning in Secondary Schools

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Sustained improvement in student outcomes requires that teachers have sound theoretical knowledge, evidence-informed inquiry skills, and supportive organizational conditions.

(Timperley, 2008)

Executive Summary

This sabbatical study was an investigation of examples of whole school professional learning in secondary schools and how schools build and sustain their capacity for professional learning.

I am committed to the on-going development of professional learning which improves outcomes for students. The professional learning leaders in the schools I visited share this commitment. While the context for each school was unique the focus on teaching and learning and improved student outcomes was shared and all schools recognised the value of educational research by academic researchers and evidence informed inquiry.

Purpose

The purpose of the sabbatical was to improve my ability to contribute to the leadership of school-wide professional learning at Northcote College by considering the models of professional learning in other schools. Of particular interest was how schools build and sustain their professional learning capacity and how effectively professional learning contributes to positive outcomes for students.

Background and rationale

There is international interest in improving outcomes for students. Improved teacher practice is linked to improved student outcomes and changes to teacher practice require teacher professional learning.

The relationship between teacher learning and student outcomes was the focus of *Teacher Professional Learning and Development: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration* (TPLD BES) (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007). This New Zealand research was a significant milestone in the research and practice of teacher professional learning. Timperley et al. (2007) synthesised the international research and practice and developed a theory of effective professional learning for teachers, based on inquiry.

Timperley et al. (2007) suggest that whole school approaches to professional learning based on evidence-informed inquiry have positive outcomes for students.

Significantly for the New Zealand context, a framework for teacher inquiry (Teaching as Inquiry) is now included in the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Northcote College is currently implementing an inquiry based professional learning model and a performance review programme to encourage reflective practice and teaching as inquiry.

Methodology

I had the privilege to visit five secondary schools during the course of my sabbatical:

- Ormiston Senior College, Auckland, New Zealand
- The Met, Providence, Rhode Island, USA
- Twyford Church of England School, Acton, London, England
- Paddington Academy, Paddington, London, England
- Frankfurt International School, Oberusel, Germany

In each school I interviewed a senior manager(s) with responsibility for school-wide professional learning. The interview was structured around a series of questions developed in response to the ten principles of teacher professional learning and development presented in Timperley (2008), *Teacher Professional Learning and Development*:

1. Focus on valued student outcomes
Professional learning experiences that focus on the links between particular teaching activities and valued student outcomes are associated with positive impacts on those outcomes.
2. Worthwhile content
The knowledge and skills developed are those that have been established as effective in achieving valued student outcomes.
3. Integration of knowledge and skills
The integration of essential teacher knowledge and skills promotes deep teacher learning and effective changes in practice.
4. Assessment for professional inquiry
Information about what students need to know and do is used to identify what teachers need to know and do.
5. Multiple opportunities to learn and apply information
To make significant changes to their practice, teachers need multiple opportunities to learn new information and understand its implications for practice. Furthermore, they need to encounter these opportunities in environments that offer both trust and challenge.
6. Approaches responsive to learning processes
The promotion of professional learning requires different approaches depending on whether or not new ideas are consistent with the assumptions that currently underpin practice.
7. Opportunities of process new learning with others
Collegial interaction that is focused on student outcomes can help teachers integrate new learning into existing practice.
8. Knowledgeable expertise
Expertise external to the group of participating teachers is necessary to challenge existing assumptions and develop the kinds of new knowledge and skills associated with positive outcomes for students.
9. Active leadership developing expectations and promoting pl opportunities
Designated educational leaders have a key role in developing expectations for improved student outcomes and organising and promoting engagement in professional learning opportunities.

10. Maintaining momentum

Sustained improvement in student outcomes requires that teachers have sound theoretical knowledge, evidence-informed inquiry skills, and supportive organizational conditions.

Timperley (2008).

The questions asked:

Who is responsible for professional learning leadership and development? How is professional learning organised? In what ways do leaders promote and participate in teacher professional learning?

What is the focus of professional learning in the school?

What are you aiming to achieve?

Is there a theory or research base to school wide professional learning? What research or theory has influenced your approach to professional learning?

Which educational researchers/writers influence the approaches you take to PL?

How is professional learning organised?

In what ways do you make use of outside facilitators?

What challenges/constraints do you have in developing professional learning opportunities?

In what ways do you use mentoring of teachers to change teacher practices?

Describe the links between professional learning and performance review.

In what ways do new staff induction processes support professional learning?

Do you employ teaching as inquiry/evidenced informed inquiry?

Do you employ problem based research and collaborative inquiry (including learning conversations)?

How do you/the school know that the professional learning teachers' are in involved in is making a difference to their classroom practice and outcomes for students?

What in-school review, evaluation and reporting of school wide professional learning do you do?

How do you maintain the momentum of professional learning?

What are the challenges you face in developing and maintaining professional learning opportunities?

What are the keys to successful professional learning in schools?

Findings

- All five schools articulated and showed evidence of a strong focus on improved student outcomes.
- The context for each school was unique yet the focus on teaching and learning was shared.
- Two of the five schools (the one NZ school and one of the schools in the UK) stated that the work of Helen Timperley had influenced their approach to professional learning.
- All schools recognised the value of educational research by academic researchers.
- Professional learning in each of the five schools has been influenced by a variety of researchers, publications and experts. Key individuals mentioned by schools (in no particular order) included:

John Hattie

Dylan Wiliam

Alistair Smith

Rachel Bolstead

Jane Gilbert

Viviane Robinson

Michael Fullan

Ken Robinson

Guy Claxton

Charles Leadbetter,

Helen Timperley

Lorna Earl

Rick de Four

Rob Marzano

Doug Reeves

- All five schools were influenced by their own context, research and data.
- Each of the schools clearly articulated their student focus, evidence base, engagement with research and ongoing self- review.

- There is a community of leaders and teachers at all levels in the schools visited with a professional commitment to developing teachers' knowledge and skills to support improved student learning. These professionals showed a generous willingness to share.
- Schools and individual teachers encouraging and supporting students to become the owners of their own learning were observed in a variety of contexts.
- Schools differed in the implementation of professional learning in terms of compulsory versus voluntary participation by staff.
- The commitment of time, resources and leadership to professional learning was both noted and evident in each of the five schools. Four out of five schools mentioned the challenge of providing time and resources for effective professional learning.
- All schools visited recognised the ongoing nature of professional learning journeys and the significant challenge of changing teacher practice.
- Three schools indicated a deliberate move to recruit teachers with an inquiry disposition focussed on improving outcomes for students.
- Schools recognised the importance of starting with the needs of the students in developing professional learning. However their starting points differed markedly ranging from a focus on appropriate individualised curriculum for each student through to embedding school wide curriculum to provide a consistency of experience for each student.
- All schools recognised the need to evaluate the impact of professional learning on teacher practice and outcomes for students.

Implications, Benefits and Conclusions

New Zealand is unique in having a framework for teacher inquiry (Teaching as Inquiry) included in a national curriculum – the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) (Ministry of Education, 2007) but New Zealand is not unique in our drive to improve outcomes for students through teacher professional learning. All five schools articulated and showed evidence of a strong focus on improved student outcomes, an inquiry focus and teachers encouraging and supporting students to become the owners of their own learning. All schools recognised the need to evaluate the impact of professional learning on teacher practice and outcomes for students. *(It must be acknowledged that the results of this inquiry are affected*

by both sample bias (all schools were known to have school wide professional learning to improve student outcomes) and the potential for confirmation bias inherent in the approach.)

I appreciate the connections I have developed with other professionals (researchers and practitioners) in this area in the course of this project and look forward to on-going dialogue and continued learning to support changes in practice for the benefit of students.

This project allowed me to compare Northcote College professional learning (aims, processes and outcomes) to those in other schools with a similar focus on professional learning. While the local contexts varied, the aims and processes are a useful reference point for the review and planning of professional learning at Northcote College.

The visits reinforced the importance of appropriate curriculum. The curriculum models I have seen during my visits suggest that Northcote College students would benefit from further work to clarify individual student and group learning needs. A key question for future consideration at Northcote College is: How do we know that what students need to know is established accurately (for individuals and groups of students)? This is the first of Timperley's (2008) four key questions for promoting teacher inquiry and knowledge building:

1. *What educational outcomes are valued for our **students** and how are our students doing in relation to those outcomes?*
2. *What knowledge and skills do we as teachers need to enable our students to bridge the gap between current understandings and valued outcomes?*
3. *How can we as **leaders** promote the learning of our teachers to bridge the gap for our students?*
4. *What has been the impact of our changed actions on our **students**?*

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Vicki Barrie
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