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The importance of ongoing teacher learning

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The importance of ongoing teacher learning

Those of us who work in providing opportunities for professional learning for teachers recognise the complexity involved in juggling the time and resources needed to meet systemic and contextual priorities. This is important work. International studies, such as those conducted by the OECD (2005; 2006; 2009a, b, c; 2013) consistently point to the role of ongoing teacher learning at all career stages in improving student learning outcomes. The significance of ongoing professional learning is highlighted in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL]). These national standards articulate a shared understanding of what it means to be a quality teacher at different levels of experience and describe what teachers should know and do at different career stages. Standard Six, engage in professional learning, is specifically focused on the kinds of learning teachers are expected to engage in and demonstrate. The diversity of possible professional learning experiences is provided in the rich array of examples accompanying the standard six descriptors, ranging from formal professional learning experiences to individual reflective practice. Additional focus on the importance of professional learning is provided in AITSL's Australian Charter for the Professional Learning for Teachers and School Leadership which states that "...effective professional learning is undertaken in supportive and collaborative school environments and most effective when it is relevant, collaborative and future

focused". The importance of access to professional learning is universally recognised but the challenge for teachers and school leaders is how best to engage in it. Issues typically include: balancing systemic and individual needs; navigating competing demands on teachers' time; finite financial resources; teacher turnover; the availability of appropriate mentoring and support; even geography. The situation in many rural and regional contexts in Australia, for example, often means that simply accessing appropriate expertise or teaching relief to have time to participate in formal professional learning is a major difficulty.

So, how might we look at this differently?

Fullan (n. p.nos) argues that, as a profession, we need to radically rethink the notion of professional development proposing "...professional development as a term and as a strategy has run its course" and that the profession now needs a major shift in how teacher learning is both conceptualised and enacted. He emphasises that teacher professional learning (the term also used by AITSL) is a more appropriate term for several reasons. First, improvement in teacher capacity which impacts positively on student outcomes involves "learning to do the right things in the setting where you work" (Elmore, 2004, p. emphasis added). This is a critically important concept when we look at learner and school diversity across Australia. One size clearly cannot suit all. Second, Fullan argues, improvements in student learning depend on each and every teacher learning all the time: not just in defined workshop settings, or during concentrated periods of time away from the classroom. An effective teacher needs to be a reflective practitioner, a proficient researcher, an expert data analyst each and every day. However, for teachers to engage in deep, sustained professional learning experiences of this kind, they need mechanisms to de-privatise their practice and opportunities for sustained collaboration within the contexts of their everyday work. This is difficult to achieve as, even with the most willing of teachers, the way their work is structured militates against such practices. Elmore (2004) captures the dilemma nicely:

...there is almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the settings in which they actually work, observing and being observed by their colleagues in their own classrooms and classrooms of other teachers in other schools confronting similar problems (p. 127).

The potential of collaborative peer review

International research into how to develop quality teachers reinforces Elmore's comments and indicates that an alarming number of teachers receive little feedback or appraisal from peers or supervisors. Consequently, they may be less likely than others to engage in focused professional learning and continuously improve their practice (OECD, 2009a, p.9). These statistics are disheartening but also serve as a mandate to address the "radical rethink" in professional learning that Fullan (2007) argues is so desperately needed. Collaboration is a cornerstone of this reconceptualisation. Literature consistently points to the importance of collaboration in teacher and school improvement (Hargreaves & Fullan; Hattie, 2012). Collaborative peer review is one way in which this fundamental shift can be effected with multiple benefits both professional and practical.

From a professional perspective, collaborative peer review recognises and builds teachers' "professional capital" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) which can so easily be eroded in a climate of performativity. It encourages teachers to work collectively. Connell (2009) argues that much of what happens in the daily life of a school involves the joint labour of the staff, and the staff's collective relationship to the collective presence of the students:

...much of the learning that school pupils do results from the shared efforts of a group of staff, from interactive learning processes among the students, and (as the idea of the 'hidden curriculum' indicates) from the working of the institution around them (pp. 221-222).

Collaborative peer review also encourages and enables de-privatisation of practice. It sees teachers as leaders of their own learning rather than as compliant and disenfranchised subjects of systemic imperatives. And, in simple practical terms, it is sustainable and resource effective.

What is collaborative peer review?

Collaborative peer review is when a group of teachers collectively investigate and critique an aspect of teaching and learning that is of shared interest/importance in order to improve it. It shares elements of a participatory action research approach. Members of a collaborative peer review team may include combinations of less and more experienced teachers, managers and external experts. It can be used as part of an appraisal process, but its main purpose is to foster teacher learning which contributes to improved student learning outcomes. Three important principles underpin this type of peer review:

1. The review must address an identified strategic priority at the school level;
2. The artefacts of the review (e.g. comments from any classroom observations and peer feedback) are confidential to the reviewer/reviewee(s); and,
3. There is an expectation that the teachers involved will make visible to colleagues and supervisors how their practice has been enhanced through the process of the review.

An example is provided below:

Example – Duration one school term

Scenario: A team of Early Childhood Teachers comprising a combination of very experienced and new teachers, a pre-service teacher on practicum and the school principal in a regional primary school, analyse their Grade 3 NAPLAN data and notice a disparity in the achievement of boys and girls in writing.

Process:

- Members of the team analyse each other's individual class data and discuss and critique different writing strategies used by teachers in the team and evaluate them against good practice literature and school data.
- In the course of these discussions, a common theme is boys' apparent self-perception as writers and how their parents perceive them as writers. Team members investigate current literature about good practice in

developing boys' literacy skills. As the school is a regional school, they arrange a Skype meeting with an expert adviser to discuss their concerns.

- The team devises a simple survey instrument to use with students in their classes relating to students' perceptions of themselves as writers. They implement the survey and collaboratively analyse the results.
- The data is shared with the principal and the expert adviser.
- A series of interventions is developed and implemented.
- During the implementation period, teachers reflect on the efficacy of the intervention and collect data (boys' writing samples and other writing assessment). Teachers share their ideas with members of the peer review team and observe each other's work either in 'real' time or in the form of video clips of their lessons.
- Teachers identify the strengths and areas for further improvement in their own and peers' practice.
- Student achievement data is collaboratively analysed at the end of the term. The simple survey is conducted again and data analysed.
- The video clips that the team decide provide evidence of practice that improves student outcomes are shared with colleagues across the school and the team writes an easy-to-use resource for teachers to guide good practice in boys' literacy. The team also provide a simple guide sheet of activities parents could use to support boys' writing.

Conclusions

The AITSL Charter for Professional Learning states that teacher learning is most effective when it is relevant, collaborative and future focused. The sense of agency and mutual support experienced where teachers research and critique their own practice collectively and means that they are much more likely to commit to that learning and consequently their learning will have a much better impact on student outcomes. Such an approach helps to re-culture and de-privatise teachers' practice and build a learning community. It promotes self-evaluation and has great value in promoting teacher self-efficacy. It also provides a practical and resource-effective way to tackle the complex issue of engaging in quality professional learning in context.

Dr Pauline Taylor is a Senior Lecturer at James Cook University. She joined JCU in 2006 after a long career in teaching and education administration in the UK, Africa and Australia. A winner of an ALTC award for outstanding contribution to student learning in 2008, and recipient of the ATEA Early Career Researcher Award in the same year, her research and teaching interests focus on access and equity, language and literacy and educational policy implementation. She has a particular interest in the First Year Experience at university and is leader of the JCU Academy of teaching and learning interest group in the First Year Experience. A passionate educator and advocate for the profession, she has been the elected secretary of the Australian Teacher Education Association since 2010. ATEA is the major professional association for teacher educators in Australia. The mission of the Australian Teacher Education Association is to promote:

- *The preservice and continuing education of teachers in all forms and contexts;*
- *The teacher education as central in the educational enterprise of the nation; and,*
- *Research on teacher education as a core endeavour.*

The Association enacts this mission through several key strategies, namely:

- *To foster improvement in initial teacher education;*
- *To promote and support the teaching profession;*
- *To form strong links with the individuals and organisations involved in educational change;*
- *To improve the nature, quality and availability of professional development for teacher educators; and,*
- *To promote and disseminate research, ideas and practices, innovation and evaluation in teacher education.*

Please visit www.atea.edu.au for more information.

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