The Development of Professional Learning and a Research Culture in a Primary School in Melbourne, Australia

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ABSTRACT: This paper outlines the development of professional learning and a research culture at Bentleigh West Primary School, which is located in a middle class suburb of Melbourne, Victoria. Whilst leadership is widely dispersed at BWPS, as it is in other schools, from students to teachers to the Assistant Principal and Principal, the primary focus in this paper is on the Principal and the ways she has influenced the professional and research culture at the school. Evidence of a change in school climate is presented as are the steps taken to create and foster learning collaborative communities among the staff at BWPS.

Despite massive evidence to the contrary, the prevailing assumption is that teachers learn most of what they need to know about how to teach before they enter the classroom.


Introduction

There is little doubt that the greatest resource in a school is the teaching staff and the greatest challenge to principals is the continuous improvement in the quality of teaching such that the highest possible standards of student learning are attained (Chapman et al., 2003; Skilbeck & Connell, 2004). Learning by students and teachers is inextricably linked; enhanced knowledge and advanced skills in teachers foster student learning (Chapman et al., 2003). It is not surprising, therefore, that the establishment of learning communities within schools, whereby teacher collaboration is developed and nurtured, is now seen as critical to effective teaching. Collaboration creates a powerful professional development environment for teachers and hence a powerful environment for teacher learning (Department of Education and Training, 2005; Elmore, 2002; Meirink, Meijer, & Verloop, 2007; NCTAF, 2003; Sawyer & Rimm-Kaufman, 2007).

In this paper I outline the development of professional learning and a research culture at Bentleigh West Primary School (BWPS), which is located in a middle class suburb of Melbourne, Victoria, and has 410 students and 33 staff. Whilst leadership is widely dispersed at BWPS, as it is in other schools, from students to teachers to the assistant principal and principal (see also Roffey, 2007), the primary focus in this paper is on the principal and the ways she has influenced the
professional and research culture at the school. As a parent member of School Council for the last five years, a researcher expert in child development, and a critical friend to the principal, Jennifer Small, I have watched and experienced the transformational changes at BWPS since Jennifer’s appointment in July 2004. Since her appointment, the school has been accredited by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development as a Performance and Development Culture School because it is recognised as a collaborative and team-based learning organisation. In addition, the school now has an established and embedded research culture (Ebbutt, 2002) with all teachers actively engaged in action research, which at BWPS is based on four assumptions as outlined by Ponte, Beijard, and Ax (2004):

- Action research is geared to teachers’ own practice and the situation in which they are practising.
- In action research teachers engage in reflection based on information they have systematically gathered themselves.
- Action research is carried out through dialogue with colleagues within and outside the school.
- In action research students (or other target groups of teachers) are an important source of information” (Ponte et al., 2004, pp. 593-594).

The steps undertaken to promote and create teacher learning at BWPS are detailed below. Given that the topic of teacher learning has been considered by researchers only in recent times (see Beijaard, Korthagen, & Verloop, 2007), there is still much to learn. The question of how a school can be transformed into a collaborative learning community is important because it paves the way for beginning the process of building capacity in teachers in order to improve student learning.

**Professional Learning in Teams**

When Jennifer began at BWPS, professional development was seen as the responsibility of the individual and for the benefit of the individual. Guided by the seven principles of highly effective learning (Department of Education and Training, 2005), Jennifer recognised that professional learning must involve reflection and sharing instead of just individual inquiry. Professional learning by an individual or group of staff must be of benefit to all within the school and this accountability ensures that collective, in addition to individual, responsibility for professional development prevails. Jennifer implemented three strategies immediately to establish professional learning in teams: professional learning leave for three experienced teachers; the formation of six professional learning teams (Preparatory, Level 1 Team; Level 2 Team (grades 1/2); Level 3 Team (grades 3/4); Level 4 Team (grades 5/6); Specialist Team (LOTE, physical education, art); Leadership Team); and a staff conference that was focused on professional learning. Each of these three strategies will be outlined in further detail henceforth.

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1 Information about this accreditation scheme can be found at:
Identifying a strength in the school in terms of pedagogy, Jennifer took a largely untapped initiative and created a school-wide focus that has seen BWPS become a leader in Environmental Studies. One of the most experienced teachers (a Leading Teacher) at BWPS along with a School Services Officer (staff employed to assist teachers with preparation of classroom and non-teaching duties, such as helping with children who may have a disability) had developed an environmental program that involved the use of gardens within the school grounds and outdoor areas of the school as Learning Landscapes. The benefit of promoting education that is in line with the sustainability of our future was clear (Department of the Environment and Heritage, 2005), yet the whole school had not adopted a uniform and embedded approach to the teaching of Environmental Studies. Jennifer encouraged her Leading Teacher and two other experienced teachers at BWPS to apply for Professional Learning Leave in order to develop a program embedding Environmental Studies across the whole school. Jennifer’s vision was in accordance with the new Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS). The professional learning leave application was successful and the three teachers spent one day a week of the 2005 academic year developing a program of integrated units of work for each year level that were based on an inquiry approach (see Murdoch & Wilson, 2004) using in-depth questioning, co-operative learning and higher order thinking, and catering for individual learning styles. They also included Rich Tasks from Queensland New Basics (Australia), Key Questions and Throughlines (or enduring concepts) from Tasmania’s Essential Learnings (Australia), and environmental education resources from the school’s partnership with LandLearn, which is a Victorian statewide educational program that is supported by the Victorian Department of Primary Industries. Rich Tasks are transdisciplinary learning and assessment tasks that demonstrate the educational outcomes or achievements of students (Macdonald, Hunter, & Tinning, 2007). Throughlines ensure that key concepts studied throughout the year are connected, to foster and facilitate deep learning.

Three units per level were designed, leaving Term 4 open for the development of a problem-based, enquiry-driven Rich Task that ‘required students to analyse, theorise, and engage intellectually with the world’ (Education Queensland, 2001, p. 7). These integrated units of work, and the production of Rich Tasks across all year levels, that are show-cased to all student, teachers and to parents, have now been embedded successfully across the whole school and have been part of the curriculum since 2006. How example, with the Preparatory students (first year of primary school), for the key question of: ‘How does the environment affect living and non-living things?’, the Rich Task is to design and produce an artistic piece to reflect their understandings of how the environment affects living things and the Throughline is to develop a curiosity about the environment beyond ‘me’, as the children focus on classifying and observing living and non-living in the Learning Landscapes of the school grounds and in their classrooms and homes.

This first professional learning of a team of teachers has benefited both the individuals involved and the whole staff who now collectively take on the responsibility for teaching Environmental Studies. Moreover, knowing that: ‘Professional learning is inextricably linked to

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3 Information about VELS can be found at: [http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/](http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/)
4 Information about LandLearn can be found at: [http://www.landlearn.net.au/index.html](http://www.landlearn.net.au/index.html)
enhancing the capacity of the system as a whole' (Department of Education and Training, 2005, p. 16), Jennifer encouraged this team of teachers to provide professional development to teachers in other schools as well as to their BWPS colleagues. All three of the teachers have done so, and have shared their knowledge at professional conferences and forums; the cycle of professional development, as mandated for Victorian schools, was set in motion by this professional learning experience.

The formation of learning teams across all levels of VELS for primary school years was another initiative by the principal that fostered collaborative learning. A collaborative setting does not guarantee productivity (Tillema & van der Westhuizen, 2006). However, as noted by Tillema and van der Westhuizen (2006), collaboration raises the possibility of engaging in study, enquiry and discourse with colleagues, and as such can be an impetus to learning. Jennifer’s aim was to move away from an autocratic system that saw a year level coordinator make decisions and teachers working independently in their classrooms, to a system where Learning Leaders provide a safe and well supported environment for all teachers in a year level to ‘discuss, study and construct conceptual principles and ideas, generate and enact new strategies for their work environment and, above all, share insights about what they have learned’ (Tillema & van der Westhuizen, 2006, p. 52). Jennifer created a Leadership Team that includes herself, the Learning Leaders of each year level, and the assistant principal. This team, that meets fortnightly, provides the opportunity for teachers to link goals across year levels and to have a coordinated and methodical approach to leadership within the school.

The third strategy implemented by Jennifer upon her appointment to BWPS was the organisation of an inaugural staff conference for BWPS teachers, School Services Officers and administrators. The overarching theme of the conference was: Achieving More Together. Because this was the first staff conference BWPS had ever hosted, Jennifer took the lead in designing a two-day forum where teachers discussed, debated and decided on how best to move forward and meet the objectives outlined by Department of Education and Training (2005) for professional learning in effective schools. The conference set the scene for selling the importance of sharing professional knowledge and working together as a team to meet the school’s overall goal of improvement in student learning outcomes. Jennifer was able to showcase her commitment to continuous learning of staff and the establishment of a learning community at BWPS by asking the three teachers who took Professional Leave in 2005 to present their achievements at this end of year staff conference and provide a workshop for teachers in relation to embedding Environmental Studies across the whole school. The conference was very well received and teachers were inspired, enthused and clearly eager to move on to the next stage – the development of a research culture at BWPS.

Action Research

Given that collaborative teams have been linked to the culture of learning in schools (Van den Berg, Sleegers, & Geysel, 2001), Jennifer and her Leadership Team knew that the potential in Learning Teams across each year level would be truly realised only when data- and goal-driven, systematic research was conducted. Consequently, in 2006, teachers used data- and evidence-based professional learning to guide school improvement (Department of Education and Training,
2005, Principle 5, p. 15). Each of the level learning teams took part in action research to gain insight into their practice by reflecting on information they gathered through systematic investigation, and developing ways to improve the work they do as teachers (Ponte et al., 2004). Whilst this professional learning was not optional, and all teachers were required to take part (Department of Education and Training, 2005, Principle 7, p. 16), the direction in terms of what teachers researched and worked on together was not stipulated by the Learning Leaders nor by Jennifer. Because of this sense of autonomy and leadership, each learning team became a micro-community of enquiry that worked together on an agreed upon topic, despite the compulsory nature of the task at hand; each learning team organised its own learning towards a common goal of generating new knowledge and teaching practices that would lead to improved student learning outcomes. This generation of knowledge, for the common good, is seen as a commitment to collaboration (Farr-Darling, 2001). To produce collaborative knowledge, a learning team must reflect on their teaching practices and the current student data, research and study best practice, and implement changes that can then be tested with the students (Tillema, 1997).

In 2006, all Learning Levels were asked to explore their VELS student achievement data and to look for opportunities for student improvement. Teachers were given an extra allocated professional time (APT) session (50 minutes) each week, and this APT session was at the same day/time for all teachers in a Learning Team so they could meet once a week to work together on their action research. The teachers developed their own proforma for reporting their research findings, but needed to do a needs analysis and to show where their data came from. The intention was to start with pre-research data, to continue collecting data and implementing new practices based on outcomes of their research and then to explore the student data at the end of the year again, comparing pre- and post-progression points to ascertain the student improvement. At the end of the year, Jennifer hosted the inaugural Action Research Forum that involved every learning team presenting their findings and conclusions to the whole staff. Here the sharing of knowledge began the process of moving towards establishing a macro-learning community within the school; that is, a context for sharing knowledge and ideas not just within one’s own year level but across all year levels in the school.

In 2007, Jennifer made the process of action research a little more rigorous. Every teacher was given $1,000 towards professional development and the learning teams were to decide how this money was to be spent. A budget needed to be prepared and once again learning teams presented the findings of their research to the whole staff at an end of year action research forum. As an example, the Level 2 (the second and third year of primary school) teachers focused on children’s writing skill with the goal of improving the teaching and learning of writing for authentic purposes. The six teachers in Level 2 used their budget of $6000 to pay for three full days of professional development with writing consultants/experts (on one of these days the consultants worked with the children during a school day) and to pay for the casual replacement teachers to cover their absence when engaging in professional development as a team. After an intensive year of meeting weekly, a thorough literature search on the topic, the professional development, and trialling techniques and procedures in their classrooms, the teachers mapped out what the expected end of year results for writing would be based on the mid year data. The end of year results far surpassed their expectations. The results of their action research and modified classroom practices based on this research (and professional development) led to an improvement in ‘Writing’ levels
with more children than expected tipping over into the 2.25, 2.5 and 2.75 levels (level required at this age is Level 2, according to VELS, because they are children in their second and third year of schooling). This was a wonderful result therefore, not only for the teachers and their sense of pride in their professional knowledge but also for their students who were the direct beneficiaries of this improved knowledge and skill base.

**Evidence of Impact: Staff Opinion Survey**

Each year, the staff in Victorian Primary Schools are invited to take part in a Staff Opinion Survey, the School Organisational Health Questionnaire (Hart, Wearing, Conn, Carter, & Dingle, 2000), which is conducted during May-June. Data from the 2004-2007 School Organisational Health Questionnaires reveal how the school climate at BWPS has improved, over this four year period. 'School climate refers to the quality of the school working environment and reflects how staff feel about their workplace and the way they work with others' (Department of Employment and Training, 2006, p. 2). A positive school climate is associated with collaborative and supportive working relationships, high levels of staff motivation and enthusiasm, a stimulating work environment, effective management support and a focus on professional development (DET, 2006).

Whilst staff changes have occurred since 2004, the percentage of staff filling in the School Organisational Health Questionnaire from 2004-2007 has been very high each year (2004: 92%; 2005: 87.5%; 2006: 97%; 2007 87.9%). Four key elements were emphasised in the findings of the questionnaire in relation to how staff members work well together and these related to ‘Empathy’ (Supportive Leadership); ‘Clarity’ (Role Clarity); ‘Engagement’ (Professional Interaction, Participative Decision-Making, Goal Congruence), and ‘Learning’ (Appraisal & Recognition, Professional Growth). The data for these four key elements are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Clarity</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whilst the data reflect a drop in each of the four elements in 2005, the first year that the questionnaire was completed with Jennifer as the new principal, there is no doubt that in 2007, as compared to 2005, BWPS teachers were reporting greater levels of empathy, clarity, engagement and learning. Indeed, percentage ranks for clarity, engagement, and learning were higher in 2006 and 2007 than they were in 2004. The percentage rank for empathy has remained lower than it was in 2004; however, the fact that empathy was higher than clarity in 2004 is suggestive of a non-management situation, where the leadership was popular, but insufficiently focused on engaging staff in ongoing professional dialogue and pushing a clear vision for the school. In addition, staff are asked to report on ‘Excessive Work Demands’ and a high percentage rank means that staff do not feel they have heavy work loads. In 2004, the percentage rank for excessive work demands was 71% against all state schools. The advice to principals is that high percentile ranks (above 50%) for excessive work demands coupled with high empathy and low clarity means that staff are not being sufficiently challenged. This type of environment, the situation faced by BWPS in 2004, the year of Jennifer’s arrival as principal in third term, could lead to a highly performing school.

In 2005 the excessive work demand percentage rank dropped to 7%. Staff were clearly expressing to Jennifer that they felt that their work demands had increased substantially. This was unavoidable given that Jennifer wanted to improve the percentage rank of Clarity and ensure that staff were clear about the nature of their roles, expectations and responsibilities as both individuals and members of a team. It is argued that higher clarity and supportive leadership leads to more teamwork (professional interaction), which leads to feelings of being overworked in the short term. Over time, though, staff at BWPS have reported higher percentile ranks for excessive work demands in the School Organisational Health Questionnaire (35% in 2006, 60% in 2007). Whereas in 2005 and 2006 the school mean for excessive work demands was higher than the state-wide school mean, in 2007 the school was below the state-wide school mean, showing that improvement in the perception of work demands has occurred from 2005-2007 during Jennifer’s time as principal.

In 2006 and 2007, the percentile rank for clarity was higher than it was in 2004. Indeed, the percentage rank for clarity has been higher than that for empathy since Jennifer’s appointment as principal. Whilst this could suggest that there is a directional leadership style or poor relationships between the leadership team and other staff members, or disunity amongst staff, this does not appear to be the case at BWPS because both participative decision-making and goal congruence have improved from 2005-2007 and are both above the 50th percentile rank, with goal congruence tipping into the fourth quartile. Similarly, professional interaction is high with a percentage rank in the third quartile in 2006 and in the fourth quartile in 2007. This profile, of relatively high role clarity and participative decision-making scores coupled with high professional interaction scores,

* Model for analysing Staff Opinion, Parent Opinion and Attitudes to School Survey Results: using Interpretation Examples:

1 see model for analysing Staff Opinion, Parent Opinion and Attitudes to School Survey Results:
suggests that staff feel a strong sense of clarity and empowerment and that they work cohesively as a team with a shared sense of direction. Moreover, individual morale and school morale have improved since 2005 and were high in 2007 (both with percentage ranks in the fourth quartile and with school means above the state-wide school means), suggesting that staff feel positive, enthusiastic, proud and energised when in their classrooms and when working with their colleagues.

Finally, a steady growth in engagement and learning has occurred that provides evidence of the impact the development of professional learning and a research culture has had at BWPS. Whilst staff in 2004 were reporting high levels of empathy, engagement, and motivation (individual and school morale), interestingly they also reported lower levels of professional growth with a percentage rank of 47%, with the school mean only slightly above the state benchmark. In 2007, the percentage rank has improved substantially and is almost within the fourth quartile (at 72%). Clearly, staff now feel more encouraged than ever to pursue professional development and that their individual needs, interests and skills are being considered by others in the school. This is the culmination of the efforts of the Leadership Team and the learning teams in working together to transform BWPS into a collaborative learning community that prides itself on professional development and a research culture that is inclusive of and inspiring to all. The data reveal this transformation and show how much has been achieved in such a short period of time. The foundations have now been well and truly laid for further growth and development of all staff in what is clearly, from an organisational health perspective, an effective, moving to excellent, school to work in.

Conclusion

In summary, I have outlined here the development of professional learning and a research culture at BWPS. This is the ‘story’, so to speak, of just one principal and her staff. The fact remains, however, that all primary school principals must ensure that the formative years of education lay the foundation for a child’s future academic, physical, and socio-emotional development. Given that enhanced knowledge and advanced skills in teachers lead to better student outcomes (Chapman et al., 2003), fostering teacher learning via collaborative professional development should also be seen as an investment for the future.

References


