Framing a Professional Learning Culture: A Case Study

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Teachers have always been engaged in the business of learning. The increasingly rapid changes in knowledge underpinning the nature, structure and practices of society, however, now means that they are having to spend increasing amounts of time on their own learning: finding out about changing policies, procedures and practices related to curriculum, teaching and learning that are central to their work, and the state, national and international contexts in which these are embedded.

There have been increasing exhortations in the literature related to commercial and professional practice for organisations and other workplaces to become 'learning organizations' and for leaders and managers to take responsibility for fostering the continuous learning of their staff. While teaching, based on the institutionalization of knowledge, derived from rules, procedures and conventions that have been successful in the past are effective when society and practices remain fairly constant, certain and predictable, the only possible solutions to problems in contexts of increasing uncertainty and ambiguity derive from ongoing learning. Further, it is arguable that collective learning is more powerful than that of individuals alone. Because of these reasons, writers such as Senge have emphasised the importance of the 'learning organization'. Educational researchers (eg Leithwood and Seashore Louis, 1998; Fullan, 1991, Hargreaves, 1997) have begun to apply these ideas to schools. In addition, the notion of the 'learning school' was presented in a policy document of the NSW Department of Education in the early 1990s. These writers have attempted to develop principles that might be applicable to the learning school, and some of the writing related to changing school cultures, both in Australia (eg Yeatman and Sachs, 1995, White, 1995), in North America (see above) and the UK (eg., Day and Roberts-Holmes, 1998) discusses learning as one aspect of change. There appears to be relatively little writing, however, particularly with reference to Australia, that attempts to describe, analyse and understand the explicit nature and characteristics of a successful professional learning culture in schools and the processes by which such a culture is realised.

This paper will attempt to articulate some of the most important elements that constitute an effective professional learning culture in one school and the roles and structures that are necessary to support these. It describes three initiatives as they have developed over five years at Curl Curl North Primary School in suburban Sydney. The initiatives are particularly focussed on improving student learning and outcomes in English/literacy and engagement of students in the middle years. The first phase of innovation commenced five years ago with Innovative Links funding. Dimensions of the programs have included mentoring to facilitate change in literacy programs across the school; a middle schooling program (supported by National Schools Network funding) with the local high school; and a school based teacher education and

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professional development course developed with the University of Sydney. Central to these programs has been the opportunity for teachers to grapple with the changes in pedagogy necessary for authentic school reform. The school has seen the need for coherent, ongoing professional development for the teachers involved over an extended time frame if authentic change of major significance was to occur.

**Brief Description of the Context: Curl Curl North Primary School**

The school is located in the Northern Beaches district of Sydney and has a population of 450 students. Twenty five per cent of students are from NESB families. The population living adjacent to the school is relatively transient with a large number of students in the lower socioeconomic range although there is no DSP funding. The school has been involved in Reading Recovery for a number of years and has an STLD (Support Teaching for Learning Difficulties) allocation of 0.6 for years 3-6. The school has had a history of flexible approaches to organisation and resourcing as evidenced, for example, in their Reading Recovery Program organisation.

The introduction of the new K-6 English syllabus by the NSW Board of Studies in 1994 was an important initial trigger for the innovation. It demanded a new (outcomes based) approach to assessment and reporting as well as an explicit theoretical framework and pedagogy for the teaching of literacy. The school's inclusion in the Innovative Links Project provided the funding for the innovation as originally conceived. The school was initially nominated for inclusion in the Innovative Links Program because it had an ongoing relationship with UTS, Kuringai, Sydney via the Associate Teacher Program and because of its reputation for school based collegial support. A new, permanent executive in the school were enthusiastic to support change. The Principal, for example, was keen to develop a school characterised by effective leadership and ongoing professional learning, in her words: a school community in which student, teacher and parent voices - all stakeholders - and rights were accepted, strengths and limitations were understood and we worked together as a team. The funding support empowered the staff to look closely at the most important challenges related to the implementation of the new English syllabus as well as outcome based assessment.

The results of the 1993 Basic Skills Tests contributed to the decision to focus on years three and four. The main reason for this focus was that there had been some resourcing of early childhood with the appointment of a K-1 literacy teacher and the school had been an exemplar in the development of the Reading Recovery program. Early literacy had also been well supported with the introduction of the Early Learning Profiles in 1994 and initial units were written to support these. There had been also a concentration of professional development at this level. Literacy resources in the junior primary area (stage 2) also needed both reorganisation and upgrading. It seemed that the continuum of student and teacher learning across K-6 needed support at the junior primary level. By the time children reached year three evidence showed that the gap was widening between those who were developing independently and those who needed more intensive support. In addition, current research (e.g. Martino, 1995) suggested that, more generally, many male students were experiencing more literacy difficulties than their female counterparts.

For significant change in curriculum practice to occur, the need for the project to be ongoing, dynamic and teacher concerns-based was acknowledged. The use of a mentor to work over
time alongside teachers keen to change their curriculum practice would allow the process to be
teacher driven. Successful curriculum change would thus be effected through collaboration and
negotiation with teachers taking responsibility for managing the amount and pace of change in
their own classrooms with their own students.

**Related research literature**
There are two strands of research literature which underpin the innovations at Curl Curl: (i)
research and writing about the use of drama and quality literary texts to promote literacy
development; and (ii) the large body of work centred around change in pedagogy and
curriculum. Related to this is the mentoring model chosen to support the change process.

(i) *the use of drama in the enhancement of literacy*
The essence of drama is the use of enactment or taking on role. The use of enactment in
enabling students to improve their talking and listening skills as well as to read, write and
understand spoken, visual and written text is well documented. (e.g. Cusworth and
Simons, 1997; Bolton, 1992; O'Neill, 1995). Drama strategies (including, readers’
theatre, storytelling, depiction, teacher in role, mantle of the expert, puppetry, hotseating,
improvisation...) support every aspect of literacy development. All language arts modalities
are used in drama and it is an effective tool for building decoding, vocabulary, syntactic,
discourse and metacognitive skills and knowledge.

(ii) *Change in pedagogy and curriculum*
If change in pedagogy and curriculum is to be authentic and significant rather than cosmetic,
teacher professional development must be:

- an ongoing dynamic process
- continually evolving to meet the needs of individual
teachers as well as the school community
- teacher driven rather than merely mandated
  (e.g. Lovat and Smith, 1995; Cusworth and Dickinson,
  1994; Hargreaves, 1997, Fullan, 1991; Hall and Hord,
  1987).

The mentoring approach was chosen because it was viewed as an empowering process - a
partnership in which the people involved see themselves as equally contributing to the process so
that the relationship is one of mutual growth (e.g. Hatton and Harman, 1997). Professional
development was conceptualised as an ongoing continuum from pre-service until retirement. The
importance of a school-university partnership was already widely acknowledged and established
in the school. This culture created the opportunity to develop strategies to meet the professional
development needs of both preservice and experienced teachers.

**Anticipated outcomes**
Specifically it was hoped that:

* literacy outcomes for students would improve. Initially students in Stage 2 (years three
and four) had been identified but later in the program students from each stage were
involved in the initiative.
* staff would gain in their understanding of, the new English K-6 syllabus particularly in the use of a functional approach to language; knowledge of the value of quality literary texts to underpin their English programs; and, understanding of drama as a powerful teaching and learning methodology to enhance student literacy development.

* ongoing professional development for teachers would become a feature of the school.

**Strategies to implement the innovation**

Key strategies for the two strands are provided below.

(i) *Improvement of student literacy outcomes*

- **a.** Release time for planning.
  Years three and four teachers were released weekly to examine the syllabus outcomes for stage two and develop explicit pointers for assessment. Highly successful and less successful year three students were profiled using the syllabus outcomes. The need for more professional development to support the implementation of the new English syllabus was also recognised.

- **b.** Planning for the establishment and trialling of differentiated classes in 1995 to maximise opportunities to meet the needs of individual students. This was realised in 1995 with the establishment of:
  - a 3/4 class of more able students
  - a 4/5 class of boys and a year 4 class of girls as a direct strategy to improve their educational opportunities
  - the value of a mentor to support staff professional development

- **c.** Staff development - mentoring model
  In May 1995 a mentor, the female author of this paper, was asked to work alongside classroom teachers to support changes in pedagogy which staff saw as vital to implement the new English syllabus document. Individual teachers were released to work with the mentor to identify their concerns or needs in light of the system and school expectations and organise a program. The teachers' self-identified needs in the context of their own classes thus drove the mentoring process encouraging ownership of the innovation. The mentor modelled strategies in the classroom to demonstrate how a functional approach could be achieved. The use of drama and quality literary texts was an emphasis of the mentoring process. The usefulness of an outcomes based approach in profiling students was also monitored. Each teacher involved in the mentoring subsequently mentored other teachers which facilitated greater ownership of the changed pedagogy and fostered the development of a literacy learning continuum. The sharing of expertise released teachers from the often isolating experience of working alone in their classrooms.

- **d.** Whole staff professional development days were designed to support the innovation and the mentor has been involved in several presentations to all teachers.

- **e.** Mentoring support for key teachers across K-6 continuum
Evaluations at the end of 1995 demonstrated that staff generally wished to broaden the focus to K-6. The most recent phase of the initiative has located the mentoring support across K-6.

f. Resourcing
The English Committee were released to work with the mentor on the development of a revised school English policy and the organisation of the school's English resources. Funding again allowed the acquisition of more resources especially multiple copies of quality children's literature. Time for planning and professional dialogue in a considered way has ensured decision making is coherent across the school.

(ii) professional development in literacy through drama and literature

Since 1996 a school based university drama program has also been in operation at the school. In this program final year B.Ed primary student teachers completing a drama major are allocated to each class. The students use drama strategies in English or other KLAs during a forty minute lesson, modelling the use of drama as a powerful teaching methodology across the curriculum.

After school the drama students and teachers attend a professional development seminar to continue to further refine their expertise in areas they have nominated. Teachers from both Curl Curl and surrounding schools are invited to attend these after school seminars.

The program aims to:
(a) enable student teachers to work alongside experienced teachers sharing expertise in an ongoing relationship over the year;
(b) enable teachers to directly experience the use of drama as a powerful teaching methodology across the KLAs and work in a practical way with ideas suggested in the English syllabus; and,
(c) share professional development in drama and literacy with surrounding schools and teachers.

In this way, resources have been used flexibly to develop a program which meets the needs of both experienced and beginning teachers and is now also reaching other teachers in the area. Up to thirty teachers from surrounding schools have been involved in the professional development program.

(ii) the development of a middle schooling program through links with the local secondary school

In 1996 and 1997 Curl Curl North and Freshwater High developed a middle schooling program designed to enable students to move from primary to secondary school more comfortably, so achieving "a continuum of learning" across years six and seven. Initially funded by a grant from National Schools Network, a key outcome was for students to develop an awareness and understanding of the changes in organisation at secondary school as well as the need for more personal autonomy.
In addition the project aimed to develop an interactive and ongoing relationship between staff at both schools and to look at relevant, accessible and flexible teaching and learning strategies for these students. Resources and teacher expertise would also be shared, thus also maximising learning outcomes.

Staff, parents and student surveys at the conclusion of the program in 1996 and 1997 demonstrated the success of the project and the need for it to continue. Students and parents were overwhelmingly positive about the program and staff reported a much greater awareness of the culture of each other’s school. In 1998, however, due to staff changes at Freshwater together with lack of continued funding, the project was suspended. There is still interest and enthusiasm to find ways to refine and develop this initiative.

Features of the professional learning culture
The timing of the innovation was appropriate: the principal and teachers had built up a climate of professional inquiry about effective teaching. All stakeholders’ voices were aware that they had a right for their voices to be heard in the school community. Teachers were prepared to work together to go forward. There was a symbiosis of philosophy, commitment and funding.

At the beginning of 1995 visiting British academic Jennifer Nias visited a range of schools involved in the Innovative Links Project and then shared her impressions of the school. Her portrait highlights features of the school culture at Curl Curl North which were key enabling factors in the successful implementation of the innovation. These are summarised below.

a. Communication: *I thought of the nerve cells of a living organism, messages constantly moving in all directions along fine but resilient pathways.*

b. Leadership: *If I am right in suggesting that communication networks are at the heart of all the developments at Curl Curl North, then the principal is certainly one of the key nodes....the principal was eloquent about her aims and vision for the school....*

c. Curriculum initiatives: *The Innovative Links Project is only one of several developments which were planned, or have grown in 1993-5. ...These developments all had leaders...were also supported by structures....*

d. Professional learning: *Staff were constantly extending their own professional education....It is part of the principal’s philosophy that all teachers are capable of professional growth and should be trusted to address what they see as important issues and problems; and that practitioners can support, develop and lead one another.*

e. Enthusiasm  *I was impressed not just by the commitment and hard work shown by everyone whom I met but also by their enthusiasm Staff saw results for their work....they felt appreciated and were given recognition...they felt supported....they enjoyed the challenge of having to adapt to enforced change but doing so in ways which they controlled*
In addition to Nias' perspective there is strong evidence that this culture continues to be fostered. The 1998 Annual School Report includes a comment from the School Council Community Representative which indicates that the positive relationships between students, parents and teachers are distinctive: *Because of the quality of teachers at Curl Curl North, any parent who has a child attending must consider themselves to be very lucky.*

As demonstrated above, the collaborative culture of CCN primary school and the sense of professional community evident in the school was crucial in the sustained success of the innovation. It enabled the links program to evolve in a positive context in which ongoing professional development programs were designed to provide for continuing support. The principal and executive staff provided both leadership and a vision for possibilities but, at the same time recognised the importance of a teacher driven, concerns based program.

**Difficulties**

The single most limiting or inhibiting factor has been the time factor. Constant demands on primary curriculum restricting the amount of time that can be spent on links. In her report to the staff at the conclusion of 1995 the mentor wrote *there have been a number of time constraints in seeing the program and all the units through to completion.*

In addition, the program will need ongoing funding to be sustained over time. The funding will be needed to continue to release teachers for planning, programming, monitoring and evaluating progress in improving student outcomes.

**Evaluating the innovations**

A wide range of strategies have been used to collect data about (i) and (ii) described above. These have included:

- individual staff surveys in 1995 to evaluate the process and plan future directions;
- audio taped interviews during term four, 1998 with seven staff involved in the Links program from 1995-1998 facilitated by an 'outside' researcher. This included a teacher who had joined the staff three years after inception;
- audiotaped in depth interviews with Principal and Links team leader conducted by an 'outside' researcher in November 1998;
- audio taped focus discussions with two groups of primary students in each grade facilitated by an 'outside' researcher in November 1998;
- professional development evaluations;
- informal student evaluations of drama activities;
- student teacher evaluations of school based drama program in 1997 and 1998;
- analysis of Basic Skills test results;
- artefacts e.g. units of work development, resource organisation, production of English policy;
- notes from discussions with mentor, facilitator and principal;
- anecdotal evidence from students and parents, collegial staff meetings, student presentations at assemblies; and,
- enthusiastic participation of staff in seminars - all staff have been supportive of Links.

*Individual staff surveys, November 1995*
Staff were asked to respond on the benefits of the program, ways it might be built upon in 1996, whether the focus should be broadened beyond 3-4 and whether they would be interested in being involved in the school based drama program.

Of the sixteen staff who completed the survey at the conclusion of 1995, twelve were keen for the focus to broaden beyond years three and four and two were unsure or did not comment because they were not to be on staff in the subsequent year. All were keen about trialling the school based drama program in 1996. Comments from the teachers who had worked with the mentor were all very positive. For example:

- gave me confidence in teaching and comparing genre;
- strategies to help English come alive;
- help with grouping; I
- have seen children come out of themselves through drama - they have enjoyed their literature so much more;
- great to have new learning activities introduced and to see them in action;
- enjoyed the team teaching..

Teacher interviews at the end of 1998
Teachers were unanimous in positive, unequivocal support for the mentoring process. They were also unanimous that it continue. Major gains in both their own professional development and students’ learning outcomes in literature and drama were perceived. Factors identified by teachers in the success of the innovation included:

- the voluntary nature of the program so that no teachers were pressured to be involved
  (and two staff have chosen not to be);
- the release time provided by the funding to plan, discuss and assess teaching and learning strategies and issues;
- the longevity of the project so that less confident teachers could see the process work successfully and become involved over time;
- sharing of experiences at meetings and through student performances at assemblies (I have learnt a lot and been able to pass on ideas and strategies to other staff members.);
- the modelling process and the credibility of the mentor (seeing Robyn work in my classroom with my kids; The mentor provided me with a window into what my students didn’t understand. Robyn is prepared to roll up her sleeves)
- the essentially practical nature of the school based drama and literature course (I believe that this kind of mentoring program is an effective facilitator of real growth and change);
- the personal and professional relationships that have grown between staff, students and mentor.

Teachers suggested that larger blocks of time with the mentor might be useful. For example, instead of the mentor coming for forty minutes once a week over a term, it might be fortnightly for a whole session and over a longer time frame. In addition, they suggested that more sharing opportunities at staff meetings might also be productive. Opportunities for grade meetings with the mentor
Focus discussions with students at the end of 1998

Two focus groups of students in each grade were interviewed. An external researcher (i.e., not the mentor) facilitated these to avoid any confounding of data by either the mentor or the teachers.

Without exception, students were positive about the program. They enjoyed the different strategies introduced and expressed the desire to learn more. The repeatedly stated that activities had:
- increased their confidence in speaking and performance;
- improved their knowledge of text types and genres;
- engaged their interest and involvement in tasks and experiences;
- developed their skills and understandings in drama; and,
- introduced new activities and strategies for learning.

The researcher commented that there was clear evidence of their claims and perceptions. Students ranging in age from six to twelve were impressive in both their fluency, knowledge of relevant terms and strategies. They were excited and animated as they shared their perceptions. They used central key terms with accuracy. All groups including kindergarten, for example, named and discussed drama strategies such as readers' theatre, sculpting, hotseating and frozen moments. Expository, narrative, procedural and factual text features were also cited and discussed clearly. They were able to articulate strategies used in the learning experiences to develop and extend their understandings. For example, year four cited the use of storymaps in helping their sequencing of events in narrative; year three rehearsed the progression from personal diaries about their experience in role on the Titanic to a readers' theatre script.

Again, the researcher stated that his evidence from the student focus discussions shows that students have experienced a broad range of teaching and learning activities which they feel have enhanced their literacy development outcomes. Their ability to recall, recount and explain experiences clearly (in some cases after three years) and their ability to see the developmental aspects of these experiences was very impressive. The quality of their writing and oral presentations in a range of contexts provides further evidence of this.

Basic Skills Tests Data

It is not argued that the Links program has directly improved the test results. It is suggested, however, that the innovation has been an enabling factor in continued success in this external measure of student literacy. An extract from the 1998 Annual School Report summarises the Basic Skills in Literacy results in 1998 which for Year 5 and Year 3:

- were above the state average with considerably more students demonstrating the achievement in the top two bands and very few compared with the statewide
statistics, continuing to experience difficulties. Both boys and girls achieved better than state averages....students from non English speaking backgrounds also performed better than state counterparts scoring above the state mean for all students.....

In addition trend data indicates that students continue to make good progress from year three to year five.

Student Teacher Evaluations
Ten of the twelve student teachers involved in the school based course responded to the request to complete an evaluation at the conclusion of semester one , 1998. The students, without exception, found the course extremely valuable. Reasons for its value included:
- practical experience in teaching without pressure of assessment;
- discussion with 'real' full time teachers; and,
- hearing teachers comments about strategies.

Students requested more time for their classroom drama teaching but again, time constraints are an issue here.

Additional Outcomes
In addition, a range of other outcomes should be noted:
- The need to be accountable for the different aspects of funding has led to increased confidence in sharing the school's initiatives.
- The opportunities created for teachers from other schools to share in the professional development program have been well received in the district.
- The development of units of work have enabled other teachers both inside and beyond the school to benefit from the innovation.
- The Curl Curl - Freshwater High Links project which was funded by the National Schools Network has cross fertilised the links project so that improved literacy outcomes might traverse the primary-secondary transition.

Conclusion

The major keys to improved classrooms and schools are the recognition that the individual school is the focus for effective change, and that the individual teacher is the focal point for classroom improvement (Cohen, 1992,p.15).

In a context of ever diminishing resources, the initiatives outlined are providing a range of professional development opportunities while improving student learning outcomes in literacy. Successful curriculum change has been effected through collaboration and negotiation with teachers taking responsibility for managing the amount and pace of change in their classrooms. Ongoing professional development has been continually refined to meet changing needs and concerns as expressed by staff. This has allowed staff to grapple with needed changes in pedagogy over time rather than overnight. The relationship between teachers and mentor has been critical - from the outset it has been conceptualised as symbiotic, a mutual sharing and co-learning, collaborative experience. The non-threatening and co-learning professional approach demonstrated by the mentor and her success with teachers initially involved in the project has created a developing climate in
which increasing numbers of teachers have been prepared to participate. The mentor's credibility as both skilled academic and classroom practitioner grew over time so more teachers were ready to work with her. The mentor has been accepted as part of the school community.

The partnership between the school and the tertiary institution in the development of the Special Course in Literacy through Drama and Literature has also been most successful. It is strongly recommended that this flexible use of resources should be further explored as a potential professional development model for the NSW DET, and schools more generally. It allows for experienced and beginning teachers to learn alongside each other and is of mutual benefit. The middle schooling project was also very successful but lack of funding has made its future uncertain despite enthusiasm from teachers at both the primary and secondary school.

The projects have been teacher driven rather than mandated from central education authorities. It is therefore useful to conclude with a comment from one of the teachers involved:

I have enjoyed and benefitted from the extra help with planning. It has been great to observe our mentor working with the class and it has been so refreshing having some new ideas and actually seeing them work. I really believe I have extended my skills and it has been so beneficial to have some time to reflect on my practice.

References
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