DISTRIBUTIVE LEADERSHIP THROUGH ACTION LEARNING

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Abstract

This paper arises from an evaluation of an activity titled Quality Teaching Action Learning (QTAL) in New South Wales (NSW) public schools. QTAL projects took place in 2004-2005 and were funded through the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program (AGQTP).

The evaluation took in all 50 Quality Teaching Action Learning projects involving 82 NSW public schools, and nine of these schools were selected and visited as case studies by members of the evaluation team.

It was apparent that one of the major factors in the implementation of action learning and schools’ individual projects, and indeed one of the major outcomes, was distributive leadership.

This paper examines how distributive leadership both facilitated and was a product of teachers’ professional learning in the QTAL projects conducted under the AGQTP.

Introduction

This paper draws on the report of an evaluation conducted by a research team from the University of Technology Sydney and the University of Wollongong of Quality Teaching Action Learning (QTAL) projects coordinated by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET) (Aubusson, Brady & Dinham, 2005). Projects were funded by and carried out as part of the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program (AGQTP).

The evaluation brief from the NSW DET was to investigate the conditions influencing teachers’ implementation of an inquiry-based approach to action learning. The evaluation encompassed 50 individual projects involving 82 NSW public (state) primary and secondary schools that had successfully tendered for grants to investigate school-based and school-driven action learning using the framework provided by the NSW model of pedagogy (NSW DET, 2003). Within the overarching project, each school or group of schools pursued an individual project (e.g., gifted and talented programs, literacy, quality teaching in science, literacy, etc.).

An interesting nuance arising from the evaluation was that while the evaluation was more concerned with the conditions underlying action learning, schools tended to see the projects as a means to address an area they had identified as important.
**Action Learning**

The evaluation was concerned with action learning, rather than its close relation, action research.

Action learning can be defined as a process through which people come together spontaneously or by design to learn from each other and share their experience (Dick, 1997). While this has always happened in organisations, usually on an *ad hoc* basis, we now tend to think of action learning as involving a team of people addressing a common task or problem. There may or may not be a ‘coach’, critical friend, mentor or facilitator, although this is increasingly the case.

Action learning is closely related to action research, which tends to be a more formal, structured approach to problem solving involving practitioners. Action learning has tended to be used more in the corporate world (see Mumford, 1995; Koo, 1999), while action research has been more commonly used in education and community settings (Dick, 1997). Increasingly, however, the two terms have blurred and are used interchangeably across a variety of settings. A related term is that of experiential learning which, as above, can be *ad hoc* or more formal, and with some form of external facilitation.

In action learning, action research and experiential learning, a key aspect is that of a cycle of action and reflection. If improvement is desired, then the cycle tends to repeat, i.e., action-reflection-review-action, and so forth (see Dick, 1997). Each step informs subsequent steps, and ideally an upward cycle of improvement is set in motion.

Action learning provides an appropriate and sustainable way of building the capacity of schools to improve practice. It is improvement-oriented, interactive, uses multiple methods and is characterised by validity, viewed as constructing, testing, sharing and retesting exemplars of teaching (LaBoskey, 2004).

Some of the advantages of action learning are those of inclusiveness, flexibility, respect for the knowledge and experience of participants, involvement, collegiality, empowerment and ownership. Challenges include building the capacity of schools to support action learning, maintaining commitment, developing effective leadership, creating productive partnership with mentors (where involved), and extending participation from small teams of key personnel to a whole school engagement with professional learning.

*The NSW Model of Pedagogy*

The document *Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools*, incorporating the NSW model of pedagogy (NSW DET, 2003), provided an important rubric for action learning around improving pedagogy and for the evaluation reported here.

The NSW model has been designed to be used by principals, school executive and teachers ‘to lead and focus the work of the school community on improving teaching practice and hence student learning outcomes’ (NSW DET, 2003, p. 3), and has been designed to be an aid and framework for reflection, action, and evaluation. The model includes three dimensions of pedagogy (p. 5):

- pedagogy that is fundamentally based on promoting high levels of *intellectual quality*;
- pedagogy that is soundly based on promoting a *quality learning environment*;
- pedagogy that develops and makes explicit to students the *significance* of their work.
‘Intellectual quality’ includes the elements of deep knowledge, deep understanding, problematic knowledge, higher-order thinking, metalanguage, and substantive communication.

‘Quality learning environment’ includes explicit quality criteria, engagement, high expectations, social support, students’ self-regulation, and student direction.

‘Significance’ includes background knowledge, cultural knowledge, knowledge integration, inclusivity, connectedness and narrative (p. 9).

Broad Findings of the Evaluation

The typical approach taken by schools was to use the funding provided to release small teams from some of their teaching duties to enable them to work together on an approved Quality Teaching Action Learning project with the assistance of a designated university academic partner. Teams were usually volunteers and contained a mixture of classroom (non-promoted) teachers and those in formal leadership positions. Principals were not usually part of the teams, although they played significant roles in developing the projects and forming the teams.

The evaluation (Aubusson, et. al., 2005) found that the QTAL projects undertaken by school teams as part of the AGQTP were broadly successful both in promoting and utilising action learning and in achieving their individual project aims.

It was found that being part of such teams led to the professional growth of those involved and that this was manifest in increased leadership activity and influence in the school and sometimes beyond.

Recognising individual teachers and empowering them to be involved with the project teams was an important symbolic and practical act of recognising and fostering leadership in the project schools, and the process of being involved in the projects facilitated and released further leadership potential.

Distributive Leadership

There has been a subtle shift in conceptions of educational leadership in recent decades. An earlier focus on educational administration and later management has turned more to leadership for teaching and learning. Additionally, an earlier focus on formal leadership – especially the principal - has broadened to consider the influence of other school leaders and teachers, i.e., distributive1 (or distributed) leadership (Dinham, 2005a; Harris, 2004: p. 1).

However, a growing emphasis on measuring school ‘performance’ has held back and worked against distributive leadership somewhat, as ‘the endurance and current ascendancy of neo-liberal versions of the performing school means that educational professionals are being objectified into leaders and followers (Gunter, 2001: p. 31). Lieberman and Miller also recognise the negative influence of increased control over and measuring performance of schools, yet see the current situation as an argument for enhanced teacher leadership (2004: pp. 1-14).

Notwithstanding the above concerns, these changes in how leadership is conceived and enacted reflect the reality that the contribution to education of distributive leadership has tended to be overlooked or undervalued, as well as a second reality that

1 The term distributive leadership is generally preferred in this paper as not all leadership in schools is centrally ‘given out’ or distributed.
principals cannot bear all the burdens of school leadership due to increasing pressures and demands being placed upon them.

There is also the issue of leadership succession, especially when leaders who have attempted to keep leadership power largely to themselves depart (see Lambert, 1998: p. 10). Finally, and importantly, there is recognition that there is unreleased and unrealised leadership potential and thus capacity for improvement residing in educational organizations (see Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson & Hann, 2002: pp. 3-16; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Distributive leadership and teacher leadership (see also delegated leadership, democratic leadership, dispersed leadership, Bennett; Wise, Woods & Harvey, 2003: p. 4). are now major aspects of and influences upon constructs of educational leadership, although as Harris (2005: p. 170) has noted, as well as enthusiasm for the perceived benefits of the concept, ‘we urgently need contemporary, fine-grained studies of distributed leadership practice … without the associated empirical base it is in danger of becoming yet another abstract leadership theory’. York-Barr and Duke (2004: 292) concur that ‘there is little empirical evidence to support [teacher leadership’s] effects’. However York-Barr and Duke are optimistic about the potential for educational improvement through teacher leadership ‘despite being thwarted by centuries-old structures and conditions of schools that resist change’ (292).

Distributive leadership is a development of the older managerial concept of delegation, whereby responsibility is given by a superior to a subordinate to carry out a task or perform a role. In this sense, there is direct accountability to the superior, who initiates and controls the activity. Distributive leadership is more empowering than delegation and has a developmental aspect in that an employee is encouraged and supported to take on a new role. In this way, distributive leadership benefits both the organization and the individual (or team) responsible for the task, and leadership capacity is both increased and spread across an organization. There is another distinction between delegation and distributive leadership, in that the latter can better allow and encourage spontaneous initiative or innovation, which can then be endorsed and supported by the overall leader. Thus, distributive leadership can be more of a ‘two-way street’ than delegation, which is more about line-management.

Under distributive leadership, those in formal leadership positions as well as non-promoted ‘workers’ can lead. Teacher leadership falls into the latter category, whereby teachers not holding formal leadership positions can be encouraged, recognised and supported to develop their leadership potential, to contribute their knowledge and skills, and to provide leadership. Whereas delegation is more likely to be concerned with giving authority or responsibility to an individual through line-management, teacher leadership is frequently about giving groups or teams collective responsibility, resources, and ‘space’ to address a problem or issue.

The ultimate challenge for all educational leaders is to make things happen in the classroom. While there is little doubt of the influence of the individual teacher on student achievement (Hattie, 2002, 2003; Rowe, 2003), leadership has been shown to indirectly influence what happens in the classroom through a variety of ways (see Mulford, 2006). A recent study of 38 government secondary schools in NSW where ‘outstanding’ educational outcomes were thought to be occurring (Dinham, 2005b: p. 343) found that leadership (principal, other executive and teacher leadership), influenced student outcomes through:
• A central focus on students and their learning;
• Teacher learning, responsibility, trust;
• External awareness, engagement;
• Bias towards innovation, action;
• Student support, common purpose and collaboration;
• Personal qualities and relationships;
• Vision, expectations, culture of success.

In the study above, leadership – both principal and distributive - created the climate and conditions whereby teachers could teach and students could learn. Further, those in formal leadership positions, particularly principals, exercised leadership that resulted in others being encouraged and supported to develop and exercise their own leadership. Trust, sharing of power, giving people discretionary ‘space’, collegiality and mutual respect were important elements in this process.

Distributive leadership is particularly important in larger schools which tend to be fragmented. Both size and fragmentation tend to militate against the effectiveness and ‘reach’ of a central leader. In the schools achieving outstanding outcomes, it was found that leadership capacity was able to be developed and exercised by teams and functional groupings (i.e., faculties, and other teams and groups) through whole-school programs and initiatives. Effective leaders were found to have the capacity to identify, develop and release the leadership capacity of others for the benefit of all (Dinham, 2005b).

In reviewing the literature on distributed (distributive) leadership and teacher leadership, Harris (2004: pp. 6-7) identifies ‘common messages about ways in which teacher leadership and distributive leadership are enhanced and supported’:

• ‘time needs to be set aside for professional development and collaborative work between teachers …’;
• ‘teacher leaders need opportunities for continuous professional development in order to develop their role …’;
• ‘The success or otherwise of teacher leadership within a school is heavily influenced by interpersonal factors and relationships with other teachers and the school management team … The ability of teacher leaders to influence colleagues and to develop productive relations with school management, who may in some cases feel threatened by teacher taking on leadership is therefore important …’;
• ‘Overcoming these difficulties will require a combination of strong interpersonal skills on the part of the teacher leader and changes to the school culture that encourage change and leadership from teachers’.

The above ‘messages’ resonate strongly with and were supported by the findings of the Quality Teaching Action Learning evaluation reported on in this paper.

The Study
As noted, a research team from the University of Technology Sydney and the University of Wollongong, with support from DET staff, conducted the evaluation of the Quality Teaching Action Learning project. Schools had been invited to apply for AGQTP funding and 50 projects involving 82 schools were successful in having their projects - which had to meet both AGQTP and DET guidelines - approved.
Method

The method used in the evaluation progressed through six phases:


This phase involved liaison of the evaluators with DET personnel; design of methodology (questionnaires, focus groups, mini-journals); and the recruitment and training of research assistants.


This phase involved the collection of demographic, personal and professional data from all participating schools; analysis of the 50 successful school tenders representing 82 schools; selection of nine case study schools; and analysis of the first progress reports from all participating schools.


This phase involved the first on-site collection of data from the nine case schools; the initial collection of mini-journals from the case schools; and analysis of school policies, meeting minutes and resources relating to school projects.


This phase involved evaluator sharing of aggregated data; analysis of second progress reports from 50 schools; and the collection of data at the DET mid-progress sharing conference where representatives of all 50 QTAL project teams came together.


This phase involved the second collection of data from the nine case study schools; the second collection of mini-journals; the preparation of the case studies and evaluator synthesis of common insights; the analysis of final school progress reports; and further examination of relevant school documents.


This phase involved the content analysis of the action learning project reports; and the writing and submission of the report.

Findings of the Evaluation

Findings from the various data sources were generally consistent. Broad findings of the evaluation are summarised below. The final report (Aubusson, et al, 2005) contains full details on methodology, findings and recommendations for the QTAL project. What follows the broad findings focuses on the role of distributive leadership in the projects.

**Broad Findings from the Evaluation**

1. Successful projects were built upon a genuine, recognised need in the school.
2. Successful projects had clear, agreed, achievable and suitable goals.
3. Support from the principal (and other leaders) is essential.
4. A credible, suitable leader for the project is vital.
5. Successful projects were characterised by effective teams and team building.
6. Schools found it difficult to start and to build momentum.
7. It is important to maintain communication with all school staff about the school’s project.

8. Academic partners provided valuable conceptual and theoretical background and assisted with framing, implementing and evaluating project proposals.

9. Teacher release time was a major factor in project success.

10. Communication about the project and successes of the project is important.

11. Schools found the Quality Teaching model a useful tool.

12. The most successful schools considered long term sustainability from the start.

13. Distributive leadership was both a factor in the success and an outcome of action learning.

14. Overall there were indications that programs were successful, but evidence of student outcomes was inevitably lacking.

15. There was limited sharing of the successes of school based initiatives with other schools.

16. Schools and individuals valued and benefited from the sharing conferences.

17. Beginning projects in term four made their implementation difficult.

**Distributive Leadership and the Study Findings**

As noted in the findings above, the QTAL evaluation found that ‘Support from the principal (and other leaders) is essential. … A credible, suitable leader for the project is vital. … Successful projects were characterised by effective teams and team building. … [and] Distributive leadership was both a factor in the success and an outcome of action learning’.

Case study schools reported gains in distributive leadership as a result of the projects when asked to report on outcomes. Comments included:

> Leadership is more distributed with teachers taking more responsibility for their professional learning and increasing their contribution across the school – ‘leadership is more spread now, more pedagogic thought … more receptive’ [Principal]. (Red Gum Public)

**Project Teams: Formation and Leadership**

The typical scenario in the schools taking part in the 50 projects was for the school to have previously identified an area of need, and to have completed some prior development and learning in this area. The AGQTP and the QTAL project provided the means to address this need in a more systematic, in-depth way. A number of schools described the timing of the QTAL project as ‘fortuitous’.

Typically, it was the Principal, with a few other staff, who developed the proposal for funding. Once funding was granted, principals handed over project direction to another member of staff, with the Principal then acting as an advisor for the duration of the project. The case study report for Iron Bark High noted:

> The Principal of the secondary school said she was ‘involved in all stages although [the project leader/deputy principal] was the driver … Distributive leadership was enhanced through the project, which had ‘spread leadership across faculties … staff are taking on leadership roles’.

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2 All school names are fictitious.
Sometimes the project leader was a member of the school executive, and at other times a classroom teacher. The latter was more common in primary schools.

A small team worked with the project leader and members of this team were usually volunteers with prior experience and/or interest in the substance of the project.

Most project teams were comprised of both teachers and school executive [promoted teachers], but this does not appear to have resulted in problems of inequity. For example, the experience at Finch Public School was that:

Initially some members of the group were fearful of the workload and were concerned that the executive members of the group might act as ‘supervisors’. Even though the eight members included four members of the school executive, the group did not have a ‘supervisory’ feel. All group members found the whole experience non-threatening.

The case study report for another school noted:

The support from school leaders for the project, especially the Principal and project coordinator was seen as essential. The project leader was described as: ‘constantly actively involved’ and ‘a big lynch pin but knew how to distribute leadership’. (Iron Bark High)

Principals had significant influence over composition of project teams without directing teachers to take part, and in several cases confided how they induced potentially negative teachers to be part of the teams. The case study report for Wollemi Public School noted:

Some teachers were invited onto the team to provide an opportunity for building leadership expertise rather than because of a special commitment to the project or perceived leadership qualities. In this way, it was hoped [by the co-leaders] that the QTAL project could contribute to building long-term leadership capacity of the school. In this distributive leadership model, each member of the QTAL leadership team would plan the project’s progress determining what actions to take and what evidence to collect and analysing this evidence to determine further actions.

However, things did not always run smoothly, as the above report noted:

Members of the QTAL leadership team confided that at least two members of the initial leadership team were reluctant members and did not develop the enthusiasm or leadership qualities needed to promote and lead the project within their stage groups. However, both left the school during the project and their replacements in the leadership group proved more productive.

Typically, the project leader was partly released from teaching responsibilities during the duration of the project to work with other staff and the university academic partner and to attend planning and sharing conferences associated with the QTAL project.

Project leaders assumed a higher profile within and in some cases outside their schools than previously. They worked with members of the project team who tended to be drawn from across the school, and in some cases with teachers engaged with the project from other schools. The case study report for Bilby Public noted the importance of ‘committed ‘leadership’ from the project leader:

The ICT teacher ‘knew where the school needed to go; she was really committed to it’. She was described by a team member as ‘our guiding light’.

In citing conditions for the success of the project at Wollemi Public, the case study team saw as major factors:

Established strong leadership team who developed their expertise in leadership, Action Learning, the NSW model of pedagogy and mathematics teaching. … Leadership of the two assistant principals who had experienced similar projects, were confident, well
respected and ‘had clout’ with both staff and the executive. … Strong sense of commitment, shared responsibility and mutual support initially between the two executive leaders, which later developed more widely among the majority of the leadership group.

In interviews at the case study schools, principals recounted how they had selected project leaders both on the basis of their leadership skills, and on their potential for leadership.

Over all, it was apparent that project leaders had ‘grown’ into the role, gaining leadership skills, experience and confidence. It was also apparent that members of project teams also grew in their leadership capacity during the course of projects, particularly those not in formal leadership positions.

Clearly, the project leaders, with support from their principals, led their teams well, with collaboration and teamwork being essential factors in the success of the projects and in connecting the projects with their colleagues in the rest of the school. Increased collaboration and communication among teachers was reported as an outcome of Quality Teaching Action Learning projects by the majority of teams (30, 60%). This trend was evident from reports at all three stages. Many teams (28, 56%) reported the value of shared professional dialogue regarding teaching, often noticeable in staff rooms as a replacement for discussion about lesson content or student behaviour. Comments were often enthusiastic and illustrated the positive nature of the dialogue, for example:

What worked was the real teamwork and collaboration within the executive and between staff members that has generated professional discussion and the ability to try new ways of doing things’. (Kangaroo High School)

Faculties were seen to be talking more and working more closely together: ‘Staff resistant to change are now getting up and sharing’. A dialogue about teaching and learning has developed and people from different faculties are now talking and sharing, whereas they were ‘their own cells in the past’. There is more understanding of secondary strategies in stage 3 [primary years 5-6] and of primary strategies in stage 4 [secondary years 7-8].

(Quotes from Principal, Iron Bark High)

The case study for Quoll High School reports that an outcome of successful team building was:

Extensive teacher learning and teacher growth in risk taking and in confidence. Teachers who felt very hesitant about ICT in the classroom have developed new programs, which they are trialling, incorporating ICT and QT principles. … These teachers have learnt new skills with the technology, and are using a greater range of resources.

Team building and distributive leadership provided a ‘critical mass’ for change. The case study report for Iron Bark High noted:

The view was that there is ‘a critical mass now, momentum’. A teacher stated it was ‘a highlight of my career … so positive … learnt so much’. Teachers were ‘enthusiastic, everyone likes it because it worked … agreed to do it, really enjoyed it, understood it, feel confident, even people teaching for years … feedback, reaffirmation, reassurance … re-enthused some teachers’.

The sharing conferences where representatives of the 50 QTAL project teams came together provided a vehicle for sharing, affirmation and leadership development. Project leaders and team members recounted with some pride how they had made presentations at these conferences, something they had not experienced before. The sharing of a project at a QTAL conference through a team presentation was described as ‘outstanding’ by staff at one school (Iron Bark High). The case study report for Peppermint Grove Senior College noted:
The two NSW DET run conferences provided a forum for hearing what other schools were doing, and provided the opportunity to showcase their own achievements. One teacher, with a certain concealed glee, reported on how the team ‘gave our workshops as though the principals [in the audience] were class members’.

Selection as project leaders enabled these people to showcase and develop their leadership expertise, so much so that some were noticed for the first time and subsequently offered other leadership opportunities. The case study report for Red Gum Public School noted:

A number of those interviewed commented how the project leader had grown in confidence and leadership capacity during the process. … The leadership, drive and enthusiasm of the project leader before, during and after the project and her availability to staff was seen as essential – ‘Without [her], it was not a viable option … one person to drive was a major factor … needed to keep pushing in early stages’.

**Empowerment and Growth**

An important aspect and outcome of the projects was their empowering nature. Teachers were given time, space, guidance and resources to engage in action learning. Rather than being imposed from above, projects grew from within and staff grew professionally through the success of the projects. A number of teams (10, 20%) noted an increase in teacher confidence in teaching a new content area where this was the project focus. For example the Egret Public school team reported:

Staff have become more aware and have a greater understanding of science and technology and recent documentation. Teachers are more confident and willing to teach science and technology and the collaborative planning of units had increased … Staff generally enjoy teaching science and technology, as compared to not enjoying it earlier.

The case study report for Cedar High noted:

The project has been a very effective professional learning activity for those teachers involved. It has ‘renewed a lot of personal interest’. It has ‘empowered the school and teachers … provided resources’, and provided time and a framework for reflection on teaching and collecting data’. … Teachers are more confident and assertive in their professional learning. They ‘are increasingly using the language’ of QT.

**Time, Space and Control**

In accounting for the success of the action learning project at Banksia [Special School], the evaluation team noted the significance of:

Dispersed leadership with choice and control given to teachers. Each team determined ‘its own direction’ and responsibility for it. They were enthusiastic about their projects.

Time was critical in facilitating professional learning. One of the main outcomes made possible by a release from face-to-face teaching time was the building of community - within teams, within schools or among schools in cluster projects. Some comments from case study reports included:

Action learning thrives in a high school setting through team teaching. The collaborative nature of action learning is lost when teaching is independent and only reflections, rather than experiences, are shared. (Bearded Dragon High).

The collaborative approach was embraced enthusiastically by all, and it proved to be the catalyst for many other aspects of the project – such as peer mentoring, group planning sessions and collaborative classroom observations. Collaboration seems to have built a

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3 The project leader from Red Gum took up a position as a Quality Teaching consultant in the local DET office following the evaluation study.
sense of team spirit at Cicada and this in turn led teachers to bond in a way they would not have experienced otherwise. The ability of staff from various schools to have time to meet, reflect and carry out stage based planning together has been one of the highlights of this project. (Cicada Public).

These comments illustrate the enjoyment that teachers derived from their ability to come and work together, something they usually lacked the time to do. This coming together fostered new ideas and created a supportive atmosphere that encouraged the risk taking and shared learning that was evident in Quality Teaching Action Learning projects.

Thus it can be argued that the collaboration that characterises action learning contributes, in a fundamental way, to its effectiveness as a means of individual professional learning and the development of learning communities. The story of one project can be used to illustrate the often complex journey toward effective community. Toad Public School is an example of a school that ultimately achieved a great deal, but felt that obstacles had been encountered which had to be overcome. One problem had been the breadth of the initial project aims; another was that some teachers did not want to be included in the project. This team found the timelines difficult to adhere to, and often had the feeling that they were struggling. It was only when they reviewed the project that ‘the evidence revealed just how far we have come in terms of quality teaching and how our practice has improved as a result of this project’.

The way that the Quality Teaching Action Learning projects were instigated allowed the teachers involved to take responsibility for their own professional learning. This was regarded as a strength of the QTAL project by a number of teams. For example the Seagull Public School team concluded that:

Action learning proved to be a successful mode of delivery for teacher professional development as it allowed for individual teacher needs, and was driven by the individuals involved. It enabled teachers to be actively involved in their own learning and it wasn’t something done to them but rather something they had ownership of and could control.

The team at Blue Wren Public School suggested that this ownership is essential as:

Schools change when individuals change and improve their professional practice. The combined use of the quality teaching lesson plan with the observation guide and follow up discussions and personal reflection had an impact on changing individual teaching practices. School change is a slow and incremental process; action learning is an effective agent for change since those involved in the research have ownership of their professional development.

Maintaining Momentum

The majority of schools had found ways to keep their projects going beyond the given time frame, and in some cases had found ways to keep the project teams together. The case study report for Bilby Public noted:

The Principal proposes that the current project team will continue as the ICT team, and that a new Quality Teaching team will be established. She further proposes that someone from the project team will also be a member of the new QT team, and will guide its progress in selecting and developing a new project. The Principal has recently completed a training course in INTEL (integrating ICT into all school learning areas), and will share her newly acquired knowledge with the whole school staff (including the project team).

Further Discussion and Final Comments

Research data derived from teachers, school reports and journals, academic partners and the researchers’ site visits, demonstrated that the school based Quality Teaching
Action Learning projects stimulated and enhanced teacher professional learning in the schools concerned. The use of teams of interested and committed teachers was fundamental to this process.

Team members were encouraged, empowered and grew in the course of the action learning projects. Important factors in the operation of teams and their projects included the time, focus and support for professional learning, the teamwork and collaboration of team members and the work of team leaders. The willingness of principals to share power and responsibility and to respect and foster the capacity of others was also crucial.

The QTAL projects were effective in facilitating teachers’ action learning, but were also effective in clarifying, valuing and affirming what teachers and schools were already doing. Thus, the projects operated in a challenge, rather than a deficit context. Likewise, the use of the NSW model of pedagogy was seen to validate and affirm what ‘good teachers do’, whilst providing a useful framework for reflection and action.

On a cautionary note, it is fair to say that teams were more adept and successful in promoting professional learning than in the research aspects of the projects. While the time frame was too short to ascertain changes in student achievement as a result of the projects, there was also some uncertainty over the tools and data needed to track changes in student outcomes over the longer term.

Most school projects had originally included the strategy of peer observation of teaching, and most of these schools had postponed this. It was clear that there are still feelings of risk, fear and exposure associated with being observed teaching, which has connotations of judgement rather than development for some teachers. However, on a positive note, the teamwork and professional learning arising from the QTAL projects provided a foundation whereby teachers were now feeling less threatened and more comfortable about professional sharing.

The evaluation team, while being convinced of the overall effectiveness of the QTAL projects in achieving their aims, would suggest caution in making such innovations mandatory. The voluntary nature of involvement and the fact that projects grew from needs already identified within the schools appeared important conditions for project effectiveness.

While the evaluation team was not directly focused on distributive leadership as either a precursor or product of the action learning projects, it quickly became apparent how important distributive leadership was to action learning and project progress. Leadership cannot develop in a vacuum, and the action learning projects provided the vehicle to build on and further develop leadership capacity in the schools concerned.

While the time frame for the QTAL projects was less than a year, there was sufficient evidence to suggest that distributive leadership has the capacity, when aligned with teacher learning, to foster that elusive phenomenon, the learning community.
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