

Blurring the Boundaries of Leadership: Insights from the Learning to Learn Project

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Introduction

A focus of the Learning to Learn Project in South Australia is systemic leadership of change for moving beyond school reform to redesign. School leaders in the Learning to Learn project attend regular "Learning Circles" with the Project Manager and colleagues from the University of South Australia to explore the issues and challenges facing leaders of changing schools. The "leaders" may or may not be the principal, but are designated leaders in their school and "leaders" associated with the project. In many cases a leadership team is involved. Over a two year period participants in Learning Circles explored issues arising from their leadership of changing schools, and shared their strategies for supporting learning in their school communities. This paper shares some of their insights and makes the principles that underpin the learning to learn project explicit. It reflects how a group of educational leaders are positioning themselves in struggles within the field of practice and how they are working with the notion of "shared leadership", amidst the contradictions and dilemmas of context and policy renewal..

Literature Review

Fullan (1996) makes the observation that while leadership in educational change has generated enormous interest over the years, "it is a tribute to the complexities and dilemmas inherent in this topic to realise that much of the message remains elusive (p. 112)". A review of recent literature shows that there is no doubt that there are many debates/critiques going on within and about educational leadership (see Gunter, 2000; Gronn, 2000).

What we know from the school reform literature of the 80s and 90s is that school leadership is high on the list of conditions that promote change in schools. In a study on restructuring and organisational culture in schools, Peters, Dobbins & Johnson (1996) found that school leaders, particularly principals, were important, firstly in conceptualising a vision for change and secondly, having the knowledge, skills and understandings to put that vision, pertaining to the school ethos or culture, into practice. Their study supported the work of many others at the time who highlighted the need for a "collaborative culture" to be developed to enhance teaching and learning (Hargreaves, 1992; McLaughlin, 1994, Lee & Smith, 1994; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Developing such a school culture had implications for school leadership. It required the principal, amongst other things, to share "power". It is clear that the extent to which school leaders are prepared to devolve power to others and provide the support for others to assume leadership roles is critical in transforming school culture from "bureaucratic organisation" to "communal organisation" (Lee & Smith, 1994).

"New" notions of leadership thus came into being. As Elliott, Brooker, Macpherson & McInman (1999) argue:

traditional role-based leadership, underpinned by notions of positional authority and exercised through "top-down governance", is inadequate for the demands of the restructured school. (p. 172)

There was a changed emphasis, which is depicted in Senge's (1990) article title "The Leader's New Work: Building Learning Organisations". In developing learning communities, teacher learning became a priority and part of the principal/school leader's

role was seen as providing opportunities for staff to learn to work differently and to assume new roles and responsibilities. Such terms as "transformational leadership" and "constructivist leadership", were used to capture the move from the single leader position to some sense of shared leadership. According to Connolly, Connolly & James (2000), one of the significant developments in the school improvement journey is the movement of leadership down the organisation.

This dispersion of "leadership" represents a monumental shift. It effectively blurs boundaries of role, where all participants in a community of learners have the opportunity to move in and out of a range of roles. "Teachers as leaders" and "capacity building" are growing themes in the literature, which reflect a commitment to teachers' growth and supports their critical engagement with learning and participation in leadership (Smyth, Hattam, McInerney, & Lawson, 1998; Seddon, 1999; Lambert, 2000).

Notwithstanding the reconceptualisation of leadership to a shared activity, there are particular challenges for the principal/designated school leader. One of the challenges comes as a result of the way principals are currently positioned – in the literature as well as in practice.

As Elliot et al (1999) explain:

even though contemporary literature on school restructuring recognises that changes are required in the nature of the school leadership, such literature still supports the hegemonic view of the principal as the school leader. (p. 173)

A similar view is expressed by West-Burnham (1997) who stresses that there is a tendency to express leadership as "super-management" and the model of headship as one of omniscience. He argues, as do other recent writers, for a change in language to be used when writing about leadership. He proposes a closer linkage between the language of leadership and the language of learning, rather than the vocabulary of management. In practice too, the principal is being increasingly positioned as the "leader", with the push towards corporate managerialism that government reforms have instigated. Principals are positioned as managers of decision-making and accountability processes which makes the "blurring of leadership boundaries" more difficult. As Gunter (2000) explains: "Boundaries can be explored through how an individual's work is labelled and positioned relative to and by others" (p. 8). Thus, it is not enough for principals themselves to view their role differently, the changes need to be appreciated by the wider educational community.

Another challenge is how do principals/school leaders manage, what Strachan (cited in Gunter, 2000) calls, the "human factor" and what others call the emotional dimension (Hargreaves, 1997a; Fullan, 1998; James, 2000). There is no doubt that "the role of the school principal has become significantly more complex" (Fullan, 1996). Recent reports in the literature have highlighted the demanding nature of the work that is needed to respond to the complexities and contradictions inherent in the realities of current principalships (Strachan, 1999, cited in Gunter, 2000; Blackmore, 1999). Findings from these studies give additional meaning to Ripley's (1997) imperative, that the real challenge for principals is finding an appropriate balance. He acknowledges that the search is "as much intuitive as

it is intellectual, as much cognitive as it is affective" and "there is no map to follow, no formula or recipes, and very few resources to assist principals in this difficult quest" (p.2).

In South Australia, the Learning to Learn Project recognises that resources are needed to support school leaders in their journey to re-conceptualise both their own leadership and their school learning environment. The next section provides an over-view of the rationale of the Project and the structures that it put in place to support participants' learning.

The South Australian Curriculum Policy Directorate Learning to Learn Project 1999-2001

Project Concept Development

In the South Australian political culture of 1999, which focussed on developing local school management, the Learning to Learn Project took on board the challenge to develop partnerships with local schools and districts to develop Curriculum Policy for the future. This, together with the emerging global consensus regarding the expectations of schools to address the futures agenda, underpinned Project conception. The question of "*What does it mean to educate for a future that matters?*" is not one, which could be taken up solely by any of the individual stakeholder groups. The Project recognised that genuine partnerships in envisaging a new map for educational redesign were needed:

Better knowledge management will not arise spontaneously in schools - as with the case with business and industry it will require champions to exercise the necessary leadership, which is involved in changing the culture of schools. (OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 1999, p. 91)

Hence the ambitious project focus on "Learning to Learn" - a focus not only on pedagogy which elicits generative thought and creativity as the needed "knowledge" of the future, but also on systemic leadership of change for moving beyond school reform to redesign:

Times of change require a capacity to innovate and skill at managing process and uncertainty. How do we educate for greater creativity in this sense - and not just for the artist types, but for everyone? (Johnson, 1996, p. 9)

The Project aimed to support the development of leading edge; futures oriented Curriculum Policy through:

1. *Connecting South Australia to leading edge learning research and world's best practice to develop Project sites' knowledge base.* A Core Learning Program was provided for leaders and staff to take the latest learning research into the local environment for experimentation and reconceptualisation of the work of the school. This learning accelerated Project participants' understandings of both the imperatives for change and the needed innovations.
2. *Reconnecting teachers to their vocation.* In the Core Learning Program there was an explicit use of constructivist methodology and a focus on learning principles as opposed to implementation strategies, which valued teachers as professionals and co-constructors of the needed redesign. Placing teachers and leaders at the centre as both

learner and creator has been an underpinning principle of all Project thought and activity.

3. *Influencing the System Knowledge Base.* The valuing of emergent planning has enabled the Learning to Learn Project to both respond to and initiate connections across and beyond the SA Department for Education, Training and Employment (DETE) in developing common understandings of the pivotal role of learning in school and system redesign. Curriculum Policy Directorate staff, together with a range of other DETE Directorates have participated in the Project's ongoing learning program and Practicums in significant numbers.

Project Design

The scope of the Project vision demanded new design principles based on the notion of "learning our way forward". From the outset a fundamental belief was that both Project management and service delivery must reflect the transformative aspirations of the Project. For sites to become confident enough to take risks in their learning and develop generative processes this had to be modelled in all facets of the Project.

Our changing understandings of the nature of knowledge and organisational change were also central to Project conception and design. Innovation, change and uncertainty rather than equilibrium form the natural state. It is not sufficient to merely tinker around the edges of existing structures and mindsets - a new gestalt, a transformation is needed:

A paradigm shift is required which places the responsibility for driving schools forward in the hands of school leaders, staff and their communities, and the responsibility for learning firmly in the hands of students. This involves radical rethinking of what a school is, where it is located and what it does. (Technology Colleges Trust London, 2000, p. 3)

Whilst many traditional models of curriculum reform benefited the individual sites involved, they did not enable the organisation as a whole to develop new understandings of the changes necessary for reconceptualising schooling for the 21C and did not address two key issues:

1. The generation of new thinking and understandings about the learning process - knowledge generation
2. The translation of this knowledge and learning outwards to the system as a whole.

The Learning to Learn Project recognised the need for project design that would enable sites to actively explore and design a new paradigm for schooling based on the most recent understandings about learning. Inherent in Project design therefore was:

A view of change as organic/dynamic that values:

- a culture of exploration, learning and increasing alignment of theory and practice;
- a view of schools and preschools as complex, open systems;
- developing the whole school as a community of learners - staff, parents and students;
- change resulting from
 - ⇒ patterns emerging from chaos

- ⇒ individual educators as co-constructors of the curriculum derived from internalised learning principles within systems frameworks
- ⇒ responding to local needs within the context of the general and global contexts
- ⇒ metamorphosis to a new paradigm.

A focus and means of development that values:

- the connection between the learning and teaching - from a focus on inputs and means to "unrelenting concern for outcomes underpinned by commitment to core values" (Caldwell, 2000, p. 11);
- developing teachers and schools as a source of reference to the local education system, other teachers and schools and national and international educational systems;
- alliances formed for enrichment, synergy and multiple views for generative process and thought;
- creating practice from principles - a generative approach.

A view of teaching and learning that values:

- teacher as designer, reflective practitioner;
- teaching and learning through:
 - ⇒ consciousness of who you are and why you do what you do
 - ⇒ personal/social relationships
 - ⇒ learning as construction;
- success demonstrated by the capacity to act autonomously.

The Project Model

The Department of Education, Training and Employment, Curriculum Policy Directorate has funded the Learning to Learn Project for \$1.25 million per annum 1999 - 2001 - a total of \$3.75 million. These funds provide for the Project infrastructure of the Project Manager and Assistant, the Core Learning Program, Practicums support for participants and Grants to Project sites for their development work. The Project Manager oversees the major strands of the Project and provides leadership to the Project sites.

The Project model developed took into account the need for pressure and support to build a culture that fostered not just reform but school and system transformation. Essential to this were the following key Project strands:

1. The Core Learning Program

It was recognised that in rapidly changing times, all educators need regular opportunities for continuing professional development under the guidance of outstanding practitioners because of the strong artistic and tacit nature of teaching. The Core Learning Program ensures all principals/directors, school based Project leaders and staffs are exposed to leading edge research regarding learning and complementary constructivist pedagogies and methodology. This premium learning program enables leaders to construct a new vision of their sites as learning communities.

2. The Learning Circles

Learning Circles provide Project site leadership teams with a small trusted group of colleagues to support their work as leaders of changing schools. This includes developing deeper understandings of the Core Learning Program focus areas of the new sciences, systems theory and organisational change. University of South Australia School of Education Colleagues together with the Project Manager facilitate regular meetings. Learning Circles also provide a forum to canvas leaders' views regarding Project directions and Project management issues.

3. The Project Colleague Network

The well-established professional boundaries between the educational sectors remain a significant barrier in school reform. Harnessing the potential innovation and energy from learning across sectors and non-traditional networks provides the conditions ripe for the generation of new knowledge. Relationships were therefore deliberately established between the Project and a range of external educators. The Project Colleagues have been strong advocates of the Project at both the local, national and international level.

4. The Practicums

Practicums are extended three-day professional development programs hosted by Learning to Learn Project sites that provide teachers and leaders across the state with opportunities to learn about their reform journey and specific focus development area. Practicums also form the critical accountability point for Project sites.

Practicums were loosely framed as the sharing of a school community's learning journey around a central core of thinking about constructivist learning theory. The Practicums model was specifically designed to ensure Project sites synthesise their learning in order to support sites across the state to develop their understandings of the latest learning research. Each Project site has a different focus area (eg. Middle Schooling, The Arts, Learning in the Early Years, Authentic Assessment, Social Learning etc) which ensures a rich and diverse range of access points for participating schools/preschools.

Methodology used in developing this paper

This paper has been primarily based on data collected from three of the Learning Circles involved in the Project. Each Learning Circle was co-facilitated by the Project Manager and a university lecturer and involved school leaders from 4-5 sites, who met six-ten times over an eighteen-month period. Extensive field-notes were taken at each of the Learning Circles and several times over the period, the Learning Circles acted as "naturally occurring focus groups" which enabled the exploration of questions pertaining to their

leadership roles. Further sources of data were the Learning Circle Reviews, which were conducted by the co-facilitators six months into the project, the Learning Site Reviews, which were conducted by the Project Manager at the end of each year of the project and the Practicum Evaluations, which were conducted by the school sites and occurred at the end of the second year of the project.

Data analysis through coding and categorising revealed that there were three main issues, which dominated the thinking of school leaders throughout the first eighteen months of the Project, and that within each of these a number of sub-themes could be detected. The rest of the paper presents findings in relation to the three key issues:

1. Planning for change
2. Engaging and supporting staff in the change process
3. Communicating learning about the change process to others

Planning for Change

As stated earlier, the focus of the "Learning to Learn Project" is on schools, in partnership with Curriculum Policy Directorate and communities, re-designing learning environments around an identified focus. The focus on holistic re-design is linked to current "system theory" - "the idea that there are properties of the whole system possessed by none of the parts. These properties arise from the interaction and relationships between the parts, and are destroyed when the system is dissected, either physically or theoretically, into isolated parts" (Hough, Paine and Austin, 1997, p. 93). Implicit in this theory is the notion that any change to one part of the system will affect the operation of the system as a whole and any attempt at improvement, then, must come from focussing on holistic system improvement.

Viewing schools as complex systems has profound implications when it comes to planning for change. "Faulty maps of change" are cited by Fullan and Miles (1992) as one of the main reasons why so many past attempts to change schools have failed. They maintain that faulty constructs about how change proceeds include viewing it as a day by day improvisation, or as the rational planning of objectives and sequential tasks. According to Fullan (1999) "change unfolds in non-linear ways" and should be seen as a "journey not a blue-print". It is this view of change, as a learning journey, that informs the planning by schools in the Learning to Learn Project. School leaders, together with their school communities, are facing the challenge of using approaches to planning that are emergent rather than prescriptive. According to Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1999, p. 9), for school leaders this means beginning "with a strong intention not a set of action plans", and allowing plans to emerge locally from response to needs and contingencies. The starting point for emergent planning, then, is for school leaders to support their communities to develop a shared intention by envisioning the kind of learning environment they want to develop, supported by a strong rationale.

The design of the Learning to Learn Project enabled participating schools to spend considerable time framing their "visions" for re-design. Although schools entered the Project with a stated focus for change, the first year of the Project provided both the resources and the opportunities (through the Core Learning Program and Learning Circles) for school leaders, and their staff, to engage with cutting edge educational theory and practice. Participants were not expected to move quickly into implementing change, but instead were encouraged to engage in a range of learning experiences in order to clarify

their values, beliefs and goals in relation to their visions of the ideal learning environment for their individual settings.

Participation by school leaders in the Core Learning Program and Learning Circles was mandated because it was seen that they had the major responsibility for leading the "vision development" phase of the planning process in their schools. In Learning Circles, school leaders shared some of the ways that they had supported their school community to move towards a shared vision. From these the following themes could be identified:

- "seeding" the vision;
- "weaving the tapestry of multiple change"; and
- encouraging a "do and plan" approach.

"Seeding" the vision

Vision is the process of taking people on a mental journey from the known to the unknown, from the current reality to the hopes, dreams and aspirations and risks of a preferred future. (Hough, Paine and Austin, 1997, p. 177)

School leaders in the Project agree that the basis for re-designing the learning environment must be a vision that is ultimately shared by a critical mass of school community members. However, they also recognise the important role played by those in leadership positions in "seeding" and facilitating the vision development process. In reflecting on how the push for change started in their schools, a number of leaders reported that the initial momentum had come from the principal or the leadership team. This was usually in response to a concern about the extent to which the current learning environment was meeting the needs of students. For instance, in one school the principal became concerned when assessment data indicated that students in particular groups were not achieving well, and shared her concern with the staff. Another principal drew attention to information arising from the School Review process that indicated that students and parents perceived student/staff relationships as being an area of concern. In both these schools the principals engaged staff in discussion about their concerns leading to a decision to focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning. Yet another principal reported that she "seeds" directions for re-design by writing a position paper, which she then shares with the leadership team, a group made up of representatives from each of the schools' teams. They then debate the paper, arrive at a shared view of future directions and present this as a recommendation to the wider staff for further debate and revision.

Many leaders in the Project used values clarification and opportunities for dialogue as processes to develop shared vision in the school community. Once established, shared values and beliefs became like an internal compass for the school to use to review policies and practices and maintain focus on the 'vision'. One principal in a learning circle dialogue described the process of developing common vision in this way...

'Lots of people worked in different roles in different faculties and so what we needed to do was to actually have a common vision. So we went away for a weekend and spent some time together, spent a lot of time - particularly clarifying our own values and beliefs and then looking at what that meant to the whole leadership team and what they meant for the school. Further down the track, of course, what we discovered is that we need to actually do that as a whole schoolwithout having the

values and beliefs stuff in place and really making sure our student behaviour management is in place then the curriculum changes are not going to happen... it's three steps. The first one is to clarify our values, second is to communicate them and the next step is to align our practice with our values'

Leaders were able to recognise the interconnection of powerful learning and a sense of ownership of the change process and new understanding that results from dialogue.

"So in a sense you're not putting a vision out there, you just initiate a question and you structure a place for dialogue to happen, and then that's what emerges rather than directing people 'you have to do this'"

The concept of congruence between values and practices was taken up in a different way by a group of Pre-schools in the Project. The leaders worked with staff on 'deconstructing' current practices to identify 'sacred cows' or practices, which are taken for, granted ways of operating in early childhood education. Questioning these practices led to discussion and focus on what really mattered to people in their work with children, in essence their core values. So when faced with the challenge of curriculum redesign as one director highlighted,

'Sometimes you need the things you disagree with passionately to help you work out what you agree with passionately'

Another process that became recognised in the Learning to Learn Project was the importance of emergence. The leader's role was not so much putting a vision out there and directing people towards it – as initiating a question, structuring a place for dialogue to happen and then capturing the vision that emerged. One principal who structured learning circles as a weekly staff development practice where teachers would engage in dialogue about articles they had read, videos they had watched or other input from the core learning program remarked,

'Its a challenge for my leadership where I'm not taking control and telling them what to do. They are taking control, they are saying these are some ideas – these things are important to us...'

For leaders who had already "seeded" a key direction for change in their schools, the Learning to Learn Project provided an ideal opportunity to further facilitate the vision development process because it provided a range of learning opportunities for the leadership team and the wider staff. School leaders were able to use funding to employ outside consultants to work with staff in areas of identified need related to improving the quality of teaching and learning. These included "brain-based learning", "authentic assessment", "metacognition" and "4MAT planning to cater for a range of learning styles". They were also able to support staff members' attendance at the Core Learning Program and provide opportunities for those who attended to communicate key principles to staff. In retrospect, several school leaders commented that they wished they had paid more attention to facilitating the dispersal of information by those who attended such sessions.

Leaders found a range of ways to sustain the momentum engendered by formal learning opportunities. For instance, one leader included a story about the power of positive teacher/student relationships in the School Newsletter and found it became a real talking point amongst parents and staff. He also posted these key questions about authentic learning in the staff room: "What are you learning? Why are you learning it? How will you use it?" In several other schools a regular segment of staff meeting time was allocated to "up-dates" on the focus for re-design and in some, school closure days were also used for collaborative reflection about shared values and beliefs and their implications for future

directions. Maximising informal sharing and the enthusiasm of people who have been involved in professional development through social opportunities was seen as important in building vision. Feedback from review meetings at the end of 2000, suggests that increased professional discussion and dialogue in staff rooms was a key outcome of involvement in the Project.

At another school the principal built on the positive feedback from staff about the power of the practicums for their own learning and is organising an in-house practicum for 2001. Another is hosting "an accountability event" where staff will share with their community their learning and changed classroom practice over the last 2 years. Yet another is taking staff to a hillside close to the school so staff have a birdseye view of the school for a visioning process to determine their school vision to 2005.

In the Learning Circles some of the discussion by school leaders focussed on the delicate balance between "seeding" and facilitating vision development and using an approach that is perceived by some members of the school community as "top down". Some leaders were aware that in their schools they had not achieved quite the right balance and so had not carried some staff with them in their attempts to collaboratively frame the directions for re-design. They saw creating the right balance as an on-going challenge for the leaders of changing schools.

"Weaving the tapestry of multiple change"

In the study of school restructuring and organisational culture by Peters et al (1996), cited earlier, more than sixty percent of participants indicated that "innovation overload - taking on too much at once" was an inhibiting condition for productive reform in their schools. School leaders in the Learning to Learn Project are very aware that in developing a vision of the best possible learning environment, it is essential that they find ways of both mapping the complexity of the school context and integrating and simplifying the multiple demands made on schools in any one year. In the Learning Site Reviews at the end of 1999 one leader referred to this as "*weaving the tapestry of multiple change*".

School leaders are in a position to have oversight of the "big picture" of their school contexts, and are also the conduit for the multiple systems demands made on their schools. For these reasons they see themselves as having a large degree of responsibility for strategies that help school community members develop a coherent view of the re-design process against the backdrop of the specific school context and system demands. One leader described a process she used to do this in a staff meeting. On a white-board she visually reviewed where the school was at by mapping past developments and future directions for key areas such as Training and Development, Performance Management, Student Behaviour Management, Information Technology, Curriculum and Literacy in a way that showed how they all inter-related. Another leader described how he tried to operate from the principle of "less is more" by making links wherever possible between the core business of the school and the Learning to Learn focus on quality Teaching and Learning. For instance a review of transition processes was not treated as yet another demand on busy staff, but rather as a key part of the Learning to Learn focus on identifying and meeting the diverse needs of students. He also tries to minimise the amount of energy that the whole staff has to put into system demands. For instance, when the school was asked to develop a policy in Occupational Health and Safety, he provided the time for one interested staff member to undertake the task on behalf of the staff as a whole.

As active participants in the ecology of learning and change, leaders shared their personal enthusiasm for the learning journey and modelled constructivist reflective practices making the shifts in understanding and the journey of learning explicit both for themselves and other participants.

“.....now we’ve worked on a vision and mission statement on the school as a whole and it’s been fantastic and I had a couple of colleague principals in yesterday doing a performance appraisal cause my DS wants to write a new referee statement cause my job comes up and that was really evident yesterday with the children that were being interviewed by the two principals. They were saying the ‘culture’they’ve talked about the culture of the school changing... even the younger ones and learning being so important within the school. So for me I thought WOW what we’ve put in place is actually showing there has been change.”

In other schools, part of the role of the leadership teams, or project teams, is to "share the weaving", in that they prioritise demands or discuss competing demands and make suggestions. Membership of these teams varies but in a number of schools, as well as the principals/assistant principals, they include teachers with designated leadership roles such as co-ordinators, as well as teacher representatives from the different year levels.

Leaders realise that an impediment to achieving productive change in their schools is the sense of disempowerment that comes when feeling overwhelmed by too many competing interests for their time and energy.

They feel that one of the important roles for leaders of any change process is to find ways to help their staff to focus only on what is important in terms of developing the best possible learning environment for students. This process of developing focus was described by one assistant principal in this way,

‘Our school goal reduced down to a focus on explicit teaching and learning and all other things have got to fit into that. If anything else comes in it has to fit into that and that’s our major priority , our major goal.....and the school motto which is extremely old is “Not only for school but for life” so we keep reinforcing that all the time that we’re here for life long learning and we make that the message as well at every opportunity to every parent, every student.

Using a "Do and Plan" Approach

In advocating an emergent approach to planning for change, Fullan and Miles (1992, p. 749) recommend that schools take an approach that is "not the traditional "Plan, then do," but "Do, then plan ... and do and plan some more." This approach has been adopted by some schools in the Learning to Learn Project to support letting go of the ‘sacred cows’ and becoming open to new ways.

“In our staff meetings we’ve got our collegiate teams and we are trying to engage in the construction of this process, of letting the team... and every team is doing something different now..... we’ve actually come from a place of not where we wee going for a few weeks and its jelling now. the ingredients are becoming more cohesive and willing to share.”

In another school the do, then plan... and do some more approach was part of the vision development process. In these schools, some members of the school community are trialing small changes in practice and using these as a basis for sharing and reflecting with colleagues about whether or not they do, in fact, contribute to improved teaching and learning. For instance, one school identified improved planning as a means of improving student engagement in learning, and all staff were involved in initial training in the use of the "4MAT" approach. The school leaders recognised that not all staff were convinced that this was the right way to proceed, and that some who were interested in the approach lacked the confidence to implement it. They divided the staff into a number of Curriculum Development Groups that were cross faculty and cross gender and provided funding and time for each group to choose how they wished to further explore planning for improved student engagement. At the same time, one of the school leaders used the 4MAT model to plan a unit of work and circulated it to staff for discussion and feedback. Planning in a different way has stimulated a willingness to have a go and to reflect on the connections between practice and learning philosophy.

Recently, when volunteers were needed to share the 4MAT approach with others in a Learning to Learn Practicum, it was found that more than half the staff had in fact trialed a new approach to planning that they were prepared to share with others. As a result of this "do and plan" approach, the staff are now planning to change the timetable for next year so that there are longer lessons to accommodate the more in-depth learning tasks being planned with the 4MAT approach.

The 'do and plan' approach appears to be particularly potent for teachers as it is grounded in practice – for some the theories of learning became clear through the dialogue about what had happened in the practice of trialing a new approach.

'Well we actually found the most powerful experience we had of all of our whole staff sessions was the day every staff member who tried something got up and explained what they had tried, talked about it, talked about the pitfalls, explained what it was and answered questions. And for everyone, they suddenly thought, now we know what we're trying to achieve.'

Engaging and Supporting Staff in the Change Process

Earlier studies of changing schools have revealed that resistance by some staff is seen as one of the main impediments to school-wide change (Peters et al, 1996; Peters, 1997). Fullan and Miles (1992) identify a number of reasons why some staff resist the change process. These include the "anxiety, difficulties and uncertainty" (p. 749) that are intrinsic to successful change and the fact that change "normally threatens existing interests and routines ... and increases complexity" (p. 750). Hargreaves (1997b) points to the expanding and increasingly complex role of the teacher, and the chronic shortage of time in teachers' working lives as further reasons why many teachers feel they cannot endure on-going change. It is hardly surprising then that school leaders in the Learning to Learn Project saw two of the main issues as engaging staff in the re-design process and providing the necessary support to enable them to sustain their involvement.

In a Learning Circle earlier in the year, one leader highlighted the challenge of trying to engage already over-loaded staff with a new direction. To demonstrate the issues and initiatives currently confronting teachers in his school he held up a series of placards. These included the following words/phrases: *SACE; assessment plans; EDSAS; Statements*

and Profiles; reduced Non Instructional Time; Personal Development Plans; Descriptive reporting; Student Behaviour Management; Partnerships 21; SACSA frame-works; Site amalgamation (and a further ten or so issues). It was a powerful example of why many teachers might shrink from any further initiative.

A number of themes emerged from leaders' exploration of the challenges of engaging and supporting their staff in the change process. These included:

- accepting different levels of engagement and involvement;
- providing opportunities for dissenting voices to be heard;
- using resources to support participants' learning; and
- re-structuring time.

Before elaborating on these aspects it needs to be pointed out that a further theme explored by leaders was that of "developing a shared rationale for change". However, the key strategies used to do this have already been highlighted in the previous section about "Seeding the vision".

Accepting different levels of engagement and involvement

School leaders recognised that, as with any group of learners, there was considerable variation in the experience, interest and confidence of their staff members when it came to re-conceptualising the learning environment. They realised that it was unrealistic to expect all teachers to become involved to the same extent and so planned a learning program that enabled teachers to participate in a variety of ways. For instance, many leaders initially worked with a small interested core of staff and relied on the "ripple effect" and the enthusiasm of this group to infect others. They encouraged interested staff to attend sessions in the Core Learning Program and then found that other staff became interested once they had seen or heard about the benefits from their colleagues. At a recent Review Meeting of one school cluster the four principals were unanimous in their view that where the Project was initially viewed with some scepticism by staff, as another example of "being done to" by the system, it very quickly became a sought after program - to the extent that teachers were vying for places in the Core Learning Program.

Local 'learning circles' or critical discussion groups set up on a completely voluntary basis were very powerful in building enthusiasm and commitment. The small size of these groups made it possible for people to really engage in the kind of dialogue that many staff felt had been missing in other forums. As one Deputy Principal said,

'It was really interesting, because we set it up as totally optional, and it got bigger as the year went on. "We're going to meet on Mondays, you don't have to come. If you come this is what we're going to be doing, we're going to be engaging in discussion about, we're going to be asking each other critical questions ".

The temptation to 'mandate' involvement in a particular program of training and development after the program was seen as beneficial for a group of people who had chosen to be involved the previous year had disastrous effects at one site:

'I almost said if you're going to stay here you needed to learn this, dragged them off and inflicted 4Mat on them and I don't think we will ever recover some of the lost ground we got there with people. We got some people who are really bitter about that... You think, I've got them

all, I've taught them all. All it means is I had them all in the room'
Assistant Principal

Conversely the power of individual teacher's influence on other staff's 'take up' of ideas from the Project was noted:

'our ESL teacher got really involved in the project and she was working in classrooms alongside other people so she actually spread a lot of info about - she modelled it and worked alongside people in the classroom and people who weren't actually in the project were picking up on Learning to Learn themes' Counsellor

At one school the Principal reflected on the freedom that individual sites had been given within the Project to determine their own focus and direction – and related that to what was necessary for individual teachers on her staff:

'there's been very strong commitment that what each individual teacher needs to do to feel comfortable and feel part of the process is to find their own pathway, to make their own journey, because that's been the message that we've had, we've presented that message very strongly....That, coupled with the notion of research has meant that people haven't questioned how they're going to be part of Learning to Learn, or where they're going to be part of Learning to Learn, they've felt part of the processes and the cultures that are in the school at the moment.'

Most leaders used some project funding to employ consultants for one or more whole staff "awareness raising sessions" in the schools' focus area, but it was then up to individual teachers to decide to what extent they wanted to take up the new ideas explored in these sessions. Those teachers who did trial changes were encouraged to share the processes and outcomes with the wider staff.

Providing opportunities for dissenting voices to be heard

Hargreaves (1994) highlights the importance of creating opportunities for individual voices to be heard in collaborative endeavours while Fullan (1997) points out that "reform often misfires because we fail to learn from those who disagree with us" (p. 8). He maintains that "resistance" to reform can be highly instructive. Yet research has revealed that up to fifty percent of teachers in rapidly changing schools feel that they are unable to air concerns or express different viewpoints (Peters et al, 1996).

Leaders described a range of strategies they used to ensure that all staff members' voices could be heard. These included brain storming sessions in staff meetings, staff surveys and the use of specific thinking tools such as De Bono's 6 hats, and PMI (Plus, Minus Interesting) to analyse their school's involvement in the Project and develop joint ownership. At one school, developing learning teams which were deliberately small at the same time as explicitly relating the concept of conflict to collaborative processes by focusing on chaos, systems theory and conflict resolution enabled dissenting voices to be heard in a positive and constructive way. The leaders reflect,

'everything that we do, we do in small groups. So voices can be heard. Whereas, in a large group people are unwilling or unable to say. It's too confrontational. But you can do it in a small group, in that critical sectioning. And that informs the big group.' Deputy Principal

... 'we had to do stuff about managing some conflict that emerged in those discussions. It was quite deliberate. It was enabling the dissenting voices to be heard in a positive and constructive way I suppose. And we gave time to do that. In other situations, those people probably would have been discarded - their ideas wouldn't have been given any merit or value. And it's interesting that the person who's most engaging with where we're at right now, is one of those who was almost pushed out of one of our futures learning circles meetings' Principal.

In another school, all staff attended an "awareness raising" session by a consultant which engendered quite a hostile response from some teachers. The school leaders arranged for the consultant to return to meet with this group of teachers so that they could share their concerns. As a result, both the consultant and the staff members felt that they had learnt from the opportunity to further discuss key areas of disagreement. A further example of enabling all voices to be heard occurred in the Practicums when some sites convened panels of teachers to share both their positive and negative experiences of the Project. This "warts and all" approach was consistently mentioned in the Practicum feedback by participants as refreshing, and enabling them to connect more realistically to their own school.

Understanding what is behind the dissent which staff members may present is another part of the process. At one secondary school where considerable elements of disadvantage are part of the educational landscape, a leader reflected about the fear which teachers faced in changing their practice.

'I think that people say well, you can try all these fancy things in other schools where the kids will do what they're told, but if they're not going to do what they are told, I'm not going to try something which I'm not comfortable with and if I do try something like that, it'd be worse than ever.' Assistant Principal.

Acknowledging teachers' anxiety could be seen as a step in supporting them to challenge their own conceptions.

At another school, the assistant principal recognised that one of her most critical dissenters perceived the training and development of the Project as devaluing his knowledge - he said

'I'm sick of being talked at, I'm sick of going to conferences and people telling me off or telling me what I have to do or pushing things down on top of me'.

In response to this, she reflected about how she could use different approaches in training and development and made a deal that

'every time I asked them(staff) to engage with an aspect of new learning and training and development I would use or model a constructivist methodology that would be immediately transferable to their classroom.... so that was really a powerful shift - its not about telling teachers how to go and teach kids - its about teaching everybody that we are all learners.'

Two collaborating school leaders reflected in their review meeting conversation that points of disagreement prompted considerable growth – presenting a view of dissenting voices not only being heard but also being ‘celebrated’. They commented that being able to deal

with ambiguity, conflict and diversity has been a really important element of continually revisiting discussions about shared purpose at their sites.

The projects focus on a multiplicity of ways to understand learning meant that the issue of diversity could also be understood differently.

... actually taken away the dissenting voice,... because there's nothing to dissent against.'

Using material resources to support participants' learning

The literature on school reform stresses the importance of additional resourcing to support teachers engaged in the change process (Peters et al, 1996; Fullan and Miles, 1992). The Learning to Learn Project has the advantage of providing a significant amount of funding to each school to support their work in re-conceptualising the learning environment. School leaders have used this funding to employ Temporary Relieving Teachers to release staff to attend various professional development sessions, but also to release staff at the school level, to engage in joint planning and "learning conversations". Providing resources to release staff to plan as a team was considered fundamental to the process of curriculum change. These learning conversations were seen as a crucial part of "making sense" of the new learning. One school for example, organised a weekly "Futures Circle" which was made up of interested staff who wanted to be involved in on-going professional dialogue about learning. The need for practitioner based professional development, where teachers have time to engage in reflection and ongoing conversations about teaching and learning, has received increasing support in recent years (McLaughlin, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1997).

In addition to funding Temporary Relieving Teachers to support staff involvement in learning, leaders have also provided funding for travel and accommodation, where needed, and for lunches, dinners, morning teas etc to nourish the whole person. Many schools have used their grant to buy Coordinator time for the Project. These roles have mainly been used to facilitate the dissemination of Project information in the school and lead the learning conversations with staff and parents. One school used funds to employ an outside person to develop a web-site to disseminate information about the Project. Many schools purchased professional libraries for staff and parents.

Additional resourcing is also provided through the Project's regular mail-out to sites of brief yet powerful articles regarding current understandings of how students learn.

Re-structuring time

To alleviate the time pressures felt by teachers in their schools, some leaders used Hargreaves" (1997b) suggestion of becoming "time bandits" who "restructure the school day to provide teachers with more time for professional learning and collaborative planning with colleagues within school hours" (p. 82). In one school this took the form of re-allocating staff meeting time to professional development time for staff to work in collaborative planning groups. In another it involved inviting parents in to work with a Temporary Relieving Teacher to run an elective program for students, which meant that the majority of staff could be released each week for three-hour study groups. At these study groups the whole staff group read articles, watched videos, co-planned units of work,

debated theories of learning, attended conferences and visited other sites. At the end of the day they then shared their learning with the parent group who had been working with the students. This provided a rich environment for learning and experimentation. A third school has convinced the school community to authorise an early dismissal of students on one afternoon each week so that staff can have additional time for professional development. A similar approach is being investigated by a principal of a country school, but because this would involve changing school bus schedules he needs to convince not only his own community, but those of four other local schools who use the same bus service.

The issues of restructuring time, together with the pressures of the school day mean that this continues to be an area of struggle for many sites. One school leader in a school which gained space through early dismissal of students, comments on the sustainability of this change indicating that even though the 'vacuum' was created as a time for professional development, it hasn't been closely guarded enough and everything has jumped into it. Another school reflected about teacher workload and suggested a structuring of Professional Development which entails a time for exposure to new information and setting up teams in Terms 1 and 2, followed by time to embed and consolidate this learning in Terms 3 + 4. This acknowledges teachers' need for structured time for reflection and space so that *'staff feel that you are not 'at' them all the time.'*

Communicating Learning about the Change Process to Others

The Learning to Learn Project invested in a particular structure to enable school sites to communicate their learning about the change process to others. This structure was the practicums. Practicums were three-day professional development experiences run by the Learning to Learn schools at the end of the second year of the project, to share their individual journeys about learning and change. They were designed for school/preschool leaders from other schools to join with two or three of their staff to explore the change journey of a Learning to Learn Project site in order to identify ways forward for their own school/preschool. The Practicum Learning Outcome Objectives were:

- increased understanding of constructivist learning theory as it applies to child, student and staff learning;
- increased understanding of the organic nature and complexity of school/centre regeneration with learning at the core;
- participants have developed insights into their own school/centre culture, and identified the possibilities for change and way forward.

Effectiveness of Practicums

The results from participants' evaluation questionnaires indicated that the practicums were very successful in achieving the set objectives. For each objective over eighty per cent of the two hundred and ninety respondents indicated that they felt it had been achieved "to a large extent" or "completely". Less than two percent felt that objectives were "not achieved" or had "limited achievement". The written comments also highlighted their success, as can be seen in the following examples:

"This has been the most significant learning of my career"

"Fabulous opportunity for reflexive, recursive learning"

"Very powerful model of teacher learning"

"I wanted to get out of teaching a week ago. After the practicum I am right back into it and enthused about where I am heading."

An analysis of the practicum evaluations and the data collected at Learning Circles following the practicums, has provided insights into why the practicums were so effective in communicating learning about the change process to others. Emerging themes are:

- extensive attention to planning and organisation;
- "setting the scene" via pre-practicum packages and reading;
- the three days;
- the challenge of "public performance";
- catering for the "whole" person ie through food, social aspects, etc.;
- connecting the experience to personal needs/learning style of participants;
- the application of constructivist learning principles (time for action, reflection, planning time, observations, extended dialogue, etc.);
- staff and or students sharing "the journey" and the "warts and all" aspects of attempting change;
- resources made available for release time for staff to be involved and for participants to attend;
- time in classrooms – to "see" the pedagogical changes;
- a flexible program.

The three-day timeframe was central to the experience. It provided much needed "enunciative space" (Smyth, Hattam, McInerney, & Lawson, 1997) - time for professional dialogue that is such an important part of reflecting on practice. It allowed people to experience being part of a "learning community". The term "learning community" has been used increasingly for teacher development, in which "necessary and powerful" processes are used to help teachers "learn new practices, and to unlearn old assumptions, beliefs and practices" (McLaughlin, 1997, p. 84). Such processes were evident in the practicums. One of the principals hosting a practicum explained that the benefit of the three days was that participants were immersed in a particular culture for a long enough time for them to begin to dissect that culture and engage in critical debate. She said, "*they had time to ask the hard questions and they did not just have to be polite*". Another person commented on the opportunity practicums provided for teachers to engage with other teachers. As she said, "*I reckon you can't beat learning from teachers*".

The benefits of collaboration for teachers' learning have been widely acknowledged in the literature (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Naysmith & Palma, 1998). However, what is also being acknowledged, more and more, is that collaboration per se is insufficient. To maximise learning outcomes there needs to be an element of challenge and deliberate attempts to change the status quo (Peters et al, 1996). Again, this challenge was a feature of many of the practicums. People – both hosts and participants were moved out of their comfort zones during the course of the three days and this provided a catalyst for asking questions and debating previously held taken for granted knowledge and practices.

The three days also provided for some hosts and participants, a re-energisation. People spoke of having their "*passion for teaching rekindled*". This is no mean feat, given, as Day (2000) notes, "there are complications in sustaining the application of enthusiasm, commitment and moral purposes across a career span" (p. 114). He stresses the need for "investment in teachers". The Learning to Learn Project practicums did just that.

Benefits of Practicums to host sites

Not only were the practicums significant learning experiences for the participants, but they proved to be a very significant learning strategy for staff from the host site. One of the major benefits is depicted in the following quote from a participating principal:

“...we learnt just how much we needed to share with our staff. We shared stuff with our Practicum people that we've never shared with staff. That was scary, I thought. I mean, how bad is that that we're sharing stuff with outsiders before we've even done it at a staff level.”

As a result of this realisation, this leader then created opportunities for activities from the practicum to be shared with staff at the school. This subsequent sharing of practicum activities with their own staff, was reported again and again by schools. Thus, the practicums enabled communicating learning about the change process to ‘insiders’ as well as ‘outsiders’. With this increased knowledge and understanding, more ‘insiders’ expressed a desire to become a part of the Learning to Learn project. In this way, the practicums helped to increase the level of engagement and involvement of staff at the host site and enabled a renewed commitment to an ongoing involvement in the project.

For those staff directly involved in planning and presenting the practicums, there was a number of reported benefits. The practicums provided the staff with an opportunity to synthesise their own learning, which in turn led to an appreciation of what had been learnt. As one person involved in the planning of the practicums said:

“We had to pull together all our learning, if we hadn't had to, we would have just kept going and not realised what we'd done”. This view is also captured in the following: “the Practicums made us actually feel we were doing something.”

For some, the actual practicum event was energising in itself as it enabled a celebration for the host site's learning journey. As one principal said, *“there was a real buzz in the school that week”*.

Another positive outcome was the increased confidence for teachers, in talking about their teaching and learning. Many school leaders commented that this was a direct result of the planned opportunities for teachers to share their experiences, whether they had given inputs on a particular learning theory, talked with practicum participants in their classroom or talked with them informally over the three days. Thus, the practicums allowed for varying levels of participation, which actually increased the number of people who were directly involved. One teacher commented,

“the practicums were extremely powerful in our school, and I think that when we were reflecting on it the value was that the power was shared among the whole staff that were involved in the practicum presentation”.

For those staff involved in giving ‘public performances’, there was a level of threat in moving from what hitherto had been essentially a private act of teaching, to engage at a much more public level. However, this initial discomfort changed over the course of the practicums, to a heightened comfort and confidence level. At one country school, where teachers involved in presenting information to participants who were largely familiar to them from the local district – the ‘risks’ involved in presenting were high. However the feedback these teacher’s received about the change that their colleagues had noticed was very powerful. Most noticeable was the confidence to articulate their practice, as the principal remarked,

“The language that teachers were using really demonstrated the thinking they were doing”.

Finally, the practicums provided for some powerful unintended learning outcomes for the host sites such as depicted in the following comment:

“We’ve blurred the boundary of learner... cause what we’ve discovered is that how kids learn, is how teachers learn is how parents learn, is how leaders learn” Assistant Principal.

Conclusion

Fullan (1998) wrote: "leaders for change get involved as learners in real reform situations" (p. 8). This describes the school leaders in the Learning to Learn Project.

Not only were they involved in "real reform situations", given the challenge afforded by the project itself, but they were prepared to become learners. They became immersed in the Core Learning Program, established and engaged in "learning communities" at their local sites and willingly participated in Learning Circles with colleagues.

This paper has presented a number of insights that have emerged largely as a result of the Learning Circles. The Learning Circles have proved to be an effective structure for "school leaders as learners". They have not only provided opportunities for participants to engage in co-construction of knowledge about leading the change process but they have also provided a structure for school leaders to help manage the emotional dimension of the change process. As one school leader said recently, *"they have enabled us to manage our anxiety"*. This is a very important role, given what we know about the role of emotions in learning and change.

A concern with Learning Circles for leaders may be that it might be seen to be reinforcing the notion of leadership being invested in a few. However, a question to be asked is; how do you begin to reflect, analyse and unpack assumptions about leadership unless you provide time for leaders to do this? If leaders are clear on their role and the roles of others in a shared leadership approach, it is easier to challenge traditional conceptualisation of leadership that may be perpetuated by others and which may constrain school reform initiatives.

The Learning to Learn Project, reported in this paper, is a highly innovative project. It has effective structures in place to support the work of school leaders. School leaders have provided consistent feedback regarding the "sense of permission" they felt the project gave them to deeply explore teaching and learning with their staff – to in fact, be learners.

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