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Collaborative Professional Learning

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Summary

Catholic Education Office Western Australia (CEOWA) established a systemic initiative to support continued improvements in teaching and learning in all schools. This was done through research, working with schools, and a comprehensive review of the literature on pedagogical renewal, school leadership and school improvement. It was underpinned by the Collaborative Professional Learning (Hayes & Noonan, 2010) and Collaborative Professional Learning in Action (Hayes & Noonan, 2011) models. These models focus on improving student learning through a comprehensive range of ongoing professional learning strategies.

The Collaborative Professional Learning (CPL) model allowed schools to research and design improvements to learning and teaching at their school site. Schools built staff capacity on a collaborative basis, using evidence-based approaches to inform whole-school decisions and to develop sustained pedagogical improvement.

The Collaborative Professional Learning in Action (CPLiA) model is a collaborative inquiry process at the school level. Transferring CPLiA into the classroom was done by developing teacher knowledge (content, pedagogy and assessment) and through processes such as Shoulder to Shoulder Learning (peer coaching, collaborative teaching, lesson observation and discussions), Models of Effective Practice (developing an on-site model of teaching and learning in an identified focus area); and other elements as described in CPL.

Schools investigated how they could deepen professional knowledge of content, pedagogy and assessment to improve student learning. The school was the centre of learning for teachers, as well as for students. Teachers were empowered, and given time to focus on their professional learning.

The education system provided direction and support without overriding school autonomy. System personnel were partially redirected to support schools, and provided targeted school-based professional learning in literacy and numeracy.

Literacy and Numeracy National Partnerships funding helped schools access professional learning and develop on-site learning, supported by a School Support Consultant. School funding, a co-contribution, was directed toward professional learning, resources and teacher relief.

It's a common goal to improve learning for our kids. It's the job of every teacher, not just the one teacher. (St Patrick's Primary School, Teacher Group)



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Target student group

One hundred and thirty-five metropolitan, regional, rural, remote, and very remote primary schools in the Catholic Education System of Western Australia used this approach to support pedagogical renewal. Students ranged from Foundation to year 7.

In 2009, CEOWA identified schools where students were at or below the national minimum standard in the 2008 NAPLAN results. Natural school clusters or regions were selected to promote collaboration and improve sustainable practices.

In 2011, the initiative was expanded to include an additional regional cluster of schools. In 2012, all schools were engaged in review and improvement underpinned by the CPL and CPLiA models.

Method

The initiative's main objectives were to:

- improve student learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy by providing effective, evidence-based teaching and learning
- monitor student and school literacy and numeracy performance to target support and improvement efforts
- embed processes and structures to enable focused, sustainable, ongoing, whole-school pedagogical renewal informed by school data, teacher experience and professional research
- develop stronger school leadership and whole-school and system engagement with literacy and numeracy teaching and learning
- enhance the professional cultures of all schools to ensure ongoing professional renewal and engagement beyond the period of additional National Literacy and Numeracy Partnership funding.

Initially the student data analysed were system and school data. This included outcome data such as PIPS, NAPLAN and other relevant data. The data were used to ascertain the relative strengths of each school's teaching and learning program, and identify targets for improvement. Each targeted area (or areas) was then expressed as an inquiry question, such as, 'How do we ensure that all students have the skills and knowledge to effectively...?' As part of the investigation, targeted data related to the focus area were collected and analysed on an ongoing basis.



For example, in 2009, staff at Mel Maria began a two-year investigation into teaching and learning numeracy. They began with the inquiry question, 'How do we ensure all students have a deep understanding of 2D shapes and 3D objects?', at the same time as they were implementing new professional learning approaches across the school. In 2011, they broadened their numeracy focus to 'How do we ensure that all students have a deep understanding of the language of maths, and the ability to apply problem-solving strategies over a variety of contexts?'

In 2011, St Patricks Fremantle turned their attention to the inquiry question, 'How do we ensure all students have a sound understanding of the appropriate use of punctuation when writing?'

If you want inquiring minds, you have to be an inquiring mind.
(Mel Maria, Teacher Group)

School coordinator of professional learning

Each school appointed at least one Coordinator of Professional Learning who was responsible for driving the whole-school investigation. Professional development was based on:

- linking theory to practice to build partnerships between schools, systems and universities
- enhancing pedagogical and content knowledge
- providing approaches for assessing individual student's thinking
- holding high expectations of all students
- providing conceptually rich strategies to improve learning
- providing sustained opportunities for teacher learning, reflection and collegial or specialist support
- developing the capacity of leaders to implement whole-school approaches to planning, monitoring and evaluating progress towards literacy and numeracy targets.

School support consultants

CEOWA appointed five School Support Consultants to help the five regions involved in the initiative. These consultants:

- worked with a cluster of about 17 schools, visiting several times per term
- established regional networks to improve collaboration between schools
- provided ongoing training for professional learning coordinators in how to use the CPL model to drive whole-school improvement



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- helped professional learning coordinators lead staff analysis of data to determine a school focus and facilitate an inquiry into upskilling staff knowledge of content, pedagogy and student learning using system and school data
- helped create effective professional learning communities. These communities support sustainable and ongoing professional renewal, shared leadership structures, and help to develop a culture of collaboration between teachers.

Specialist area consultants

Specialist Area Consultants from CEOWA worked with schools to provide professional learning events to support pedagogical renewal in literacy and numeracy.

School key teachers in literacy and numeracy

Schools selected highly effective educators to act as key teachers in literacy and numeracy. Schools received funding so that they could release key teachers for regular training, allowing those teachers to become models of effective practice in their own schools.

We had a mindset change. We used to think professional development was an expert coming in. Now we see value in each other. (St Joseph's College, Teacher Group)

Results

An annual survey was completed by the school community stakeholders – including teachers, parents and students – to establish the school's systemic cultural data (a measure of their organisational culture).

Data were collected from principals using the Principals' Reference Group. Each school's School Support Consultants regularly gathered anecdotal evidence, and collated results of informal questionnaires about the effectiveness of whole-school investigations and particular elements or phases of the CPL and CPLiA models. At the end of 2010, principals, assistant principals, CPL coordinators and key teachers were also surveyed about the effectiveness of the support they received from School Support Consultants.

Each school's student achievement data from annual national assessments were investigated in relation to the focus of their professional learning investigations in 2010 and 2011, and as identified in their annual literacy and numeracy plan.



Improvements in student performance were minor in extent and tracked at different levels of operation:

- At a classroom level, through an action-learning approach. Teachers designed their own methods of data collection to monitor the effectiveness of their own implementations. These included student work samples and observation, peer observation, classroom assessments, and anecdotal evidence.
- At a school level, through an annual cycle of review. Schools were supported to annually analyse student outcome trends in NAPLAN literacy and numeracy over time, school based pre- and post-assessment data and contextual knowledge of the needs of their students and community. The data were used to determine an annual target area for pedagogical renewal. Pre- and post-assessment data were analysed annually to determine the effect of pedagogical changes on student literacy and numeracy outcomes.
- At a system level, through analysing longitudinal NAPLAN data and reviewing annual school literacy and numeracy plans. In addition to national assessments, early years assessments were the primary source of data collected at the system level: PIPS, observation survey, mathematics assessment interview.

The following examples demonstrate evidence of improved student learning:

- At Mel Maria, positive trends in national assessment data in numeracy were seen across the year 3 and year 5 cohorts from 2010 to 2012.
- At St Patrick's Fremantle, an analysis of national assessment data for 2010 through to 2012 showed significant growth in every quartile for the writing and grammar and punctuation assessments. When students were tracked from year 3 in 2010 to year 5 in 2012, a very significant gain in grammar and punctuation was seen both across the cohort and in comparison with the national cohort.

The most powerful professional learning occurred in the classrooms at each school.

It's the people who are leading. They believe in it. (Banksia Grove, Leadership Group)

Next steps

Schools who undertake this initiative need to be prepared for a sustained effort. It requires strategic planning to align school priorities and resources to support the focus. That planning is required to support staff so that they can investigate their chosen focus deeply.



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It's crucial to build and sustain a positive collaborative professional culture. This will take time, as it develops incrementally. Schools will need to be patient and persistent. The final challenge for schools is to shift thinking to focus on teacher learning with an inquiry mindset.

We come here to do good work, not just to work. (Padbury Catholic Primary School, Teacher Group)

Lessons learned

In early 2011, a survey conducted by the Strategy, Policy and Governance team verified the positive impact of – and support for – the mode of operation used in schools. The targeted and specific support provided by regional School Support Consultants was rated as particularly beneficial for schools.

The following factors contributed to the overall success of the initiative:

- The initiative was contextually based with a systemic framework. All staff at the school and system level used the same framework and language to develop support networks.
- Schools focused on building teacher capacity in a sustainable way by establishing a collaborative professional culture.
- School Support Consultants were crucial in helping schools build collaborative learning cultures, and in mentoring professional learning coordinators.
- The development of site-based models of effective practice provided schools with excellent literacy and numeracy pedagogy.
- Schools focused on using data to inform decision making, leading to site-based accountability. The needs of students were a priority, common contextual goals were determined and all staff were accountable for those goals.
- Schools recognised and made effective use of the expertise within their school. Most professional learning took place in the classroom at the point of instruction.
- Professional learning was ongoing and aligned with whole-school priorities.
- Schools that implemented the models as intended saw improved outcomes across all (or most) of the targeted learning areas.
- The cultures of investigation and embedded annual cycles of pedagogical review and renewal continue in every school involved in the initiative.
- Training professional learning coordinators has created teachers capable of leading ongoing renewal.
- Schools have developed shared models of leadership.
- Key teachers trained in literacy and numeracy best practice became resources for staff development.



Research base

Australia prides itself on producing high-quality teachers (Thomson, De Bortoli, Nicholas, Hillman & Buckley, 2011). However, while schooling in Australia is strong, there is scope for continued improvement, particularly in ensuring equity and quality of education for all young people (Caldwell, 2011).

One core theme that has emerged from the school improvement literature is the key role that teachers play in enhancing the quality of learning experiences for students (Hayes & Noonan 2008; Barber & Mourshed 2007; Louden et al. 2005). Effective teachers have repeatedly been shown to positively alter the learning trajectories of students (Hattie, 2012). The message is clear: to improve outcomes for students, you need to improve the quality of instruction.


Building a positive professional learning culture is a common thread in the many lists and lessons about school improvement. Current literature and research proves the importance of culture development as the key to improving the quality of education (Reeves 2009; Wagner 2006).

By developing culture, defined simply by Hargreaves and Fullan as 'the relationships among people' (2012, p. 104), or by Cromwell as 'the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the "persona" of the school' (2002, cited in Muhammad, 2009, p.11), schools and systems can develop and empower teachers, and therefore improve student achievement (Fullan, 2008).

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Contacts

Peter Hayes
Projects Leader
Literacy and Numeracy
Catholic Education Office of Western Australia:
Email hayes.peter.i@ceo.wa.edu.au