Designing Professional Learning for Effecting Change: Partnerships for Local and System Networks

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Abstract

This paper presents (i) a purpose-built conceptual model for professional learning and (ii) a leadership framework designed to support a large-scale project involving diverse sites across the state of Queensland, Australia. The project had as its focus teacher-capacity building and ways to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for students at educational disadvantage. It involved 15 intersectoral clusters and brought together Middle School teachers, principals, curriculum leaders and management personnel from Education Queensland, the Association of Independent Schools Inc., and the Catholic Education Commission. In the paper we discuss how the project worked at the interface of research and practice. Further, we discuss how professional learning was facilitated by a multi-layered approach that acknowledged the importance of research-based learning, curriculum and pedagogic leadership by principals, and strong opportunities for teacher agency through cross-cluster and intersectoral collaboration. In conclusion, we invite readers to consider how the approach represents a radical new way to think about what could count as valued professional learning interactions.

Introduction

This paper outlines and describes a purpose-built conceptual model and leadership framework designed to support professional learning in a state-wide research and teaching project that focused on the alignment of assessment, curriculum and pedagogy. The paper is the first in a series with the second and subsequent articles presenting empirical, evidential research to show how the model and framework combined to build teacher capacity in classroom assessment in the middle years. Also examined will be changes in how teachers conceptualised literacy and numeracy, especially in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and disadvantage. The one-year project was undertaken in Queensland, Australia, in 2005. It was conceptualised and implemented in response to the *Literacy and Numeracy in the Middle Years of Schooling Initiative Strand A* funded by the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) under the *Grants for National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies and Projects Programme*[1]. The project involved fifteen intersectoral clusters (a regional grouping of approximately ten schools) across Queensland, bringing together middle schooling teachers (Years 4 to 9), principals, curriculum leaders and management personnel from the three operating sectors (Education Queensland, the Association of Independent Schools and the Catholic Education Commission). In what follows, first we describe how clusters were formed and selected into the project to give readers a sense of the scope of geographic and demographic diversity of sites involved. Second, we discuss research that informed the development of the professional learning model. Third, we present the model and framework in terms of their design features and consider issues of implementation. Finally, we reflect on their utility for effecting change and consider ways of enhancing design for future application. From the outset we invite readers to consider whether the model and framework may have application to professional learning initiatives beyond the project reported in the paper.

Part 1: Cluster composition and selection

An intersectoral planning group met in mid-2004 to develop the project design and the process for the selection of clusters. Readers may be interested to learn that the project's development of a cluster configuration was purpose-built. That is to say, it did not pre-exist the project. The aim of the cluster configuration was to bring together new collaborations across schools within geographic regions and across educational sectors. The project management team[2] and Academic Adviser[3] started from the understanding that the three participating sectors had a history of established ways of grouping and funding schools in regions across the state. However, the project was designed to enable professional learning to occur in new ways – within and across sectors – that had not occurred systematically in the past. This initiative therefore required a new approach to school grouping with direct transfer of apportioned funds to clusters. This approach was informed by the belief that such

funds were essential for teacher-release time from routine classroom work. It was in this time that space could be made to undertake professional learning with colleagues in local contexts and in surrounding schools with intersectoral participation.

Project management called for detailed applications from groups of middle schools (including upper primary and lower secondary) that self-nominated as potential clusters. Thirty-six cluster applications were received with a final fifteen clusters selected on the basis of geographic and demographic diversity and the ability to demonstrate a commitment to:

- Using contemporary research to address the literacy and numeracy challenges faced by students in the middle phase of learning;
- Informing whole-school approaches to assessment, pedagogy and curriculum;
- Using assessment to inform curriculum and pedagogical reform;
- Valuing and responding to diversity;
- Participating in intersectoral collaboration, evidenced from previous experience;
- Facilitating curriculum leadership and professional learning communities; and,
- Using data-driven and research-based programs to improve outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students in the middle phase of learning.

In the implementation phase, the cluster configuration included 100 schools, nearly 300 teachers and approximately 5000 students. Figure 1 illustrates this configuration showing the distribution of sites and representation from metropolitan, coastal, rural and remote schools across the state of Queensland.

The disaggregation of data by clusters indicated that socio-economic disadvantage, particularly as it combined with English as a second or subsequent language (ESL) and/or Indigineity was a common factor in the demographics of many project schools.

In what follows, the multiple mechanisms for establishing and maintaining contact with participants are outlined after an initial discussion of research and policy that informed the work.

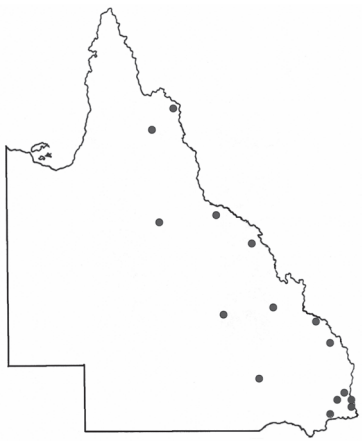

Figure 1: Cluster Distribution

Part 2: Informing research, design and implementation

Four focal issues were identified from recent research findings and policy initiatives about professional learning needs. The decision was taken to focus primarily on large-scale research studies undertaken at national and state levels in Australia, with an emphasis on reports and publications relating to focal issues. The four issues of interest were: a) the middle phase of learning; b) the literacy demands of curriculum and assessment; c) professional learning and leadership, and d) educational disadvantage.

The middle phase of learning The report *Beyond the Middle* (Luke et al., 2003) identified key issues for middle schooling. Of particular relevance to the Queensland Project reported in this paper were the following report findings and recommendations. First, the report identified that many middle years initiatives for target groups were driven by a developmentalist philosophy that represents "adolescence as a psychologically troubled time" (Luke et al., p. 136) and in so doing failed to respond to growing diversity in the student population. Second, it noted that there is a proliferation of remediation programs rather than programs that address curriculum, literacy and numeracy demands that students face in learning, and mainstream pedagogy.

> The problem in literacy education remains this: while the middle years approaches have focused attention on literacy – it remains largely based on a remedial basic-skills focused model, with less evidence that it has spilled out in a significant way across the curriculum to change mainstream pedagogy. (Luke et al., p. 115)

In developing this further, the report identified the "virtual disappearance of literacy across the curriculum" (Luke et al., p. 42).

Further findings included the need for an emphasis on higher order thinking, critical literacy, greater depth of knowledge and understanding, and increased overall intellectual demand and expectations of middle years students (Luke et al., 2003, p. 8). Assessment and reporting were identified as key elements of effective teaching and learning. They were also seen as the principle levers in addressing issues of accountability, curriculum reform and improved student outcomes (Luke et al., p. 97). The report called for more systematic advice to be provided to schools on the best uses of standardised testing and other forms of assessment in literacy and numeracy to inform curriculum and teaching.

In regard to new and emerging technologies, the report *Beyond the Middle* (Luke et al, 2003) also highlighted how texts of mass media, popular technologies and computer culture act as powerful informal pedagogies through which youth are

increasingly defining and differentiating themselves from adults and other youth. The authors saw the potential of multi-mediated literacies to transform outdated literacy pedagogies as being still largely untapped. Another area of concern was numeracy with the authors identifying that the scope of teacher professional development for student numeracy improvement should include teachers of all key learning areas so that students are provided with opportunities to apply their mathematical knowledge in context.

Curriculum literacies The project sought to link the research findings on curriculum literacies (Cumming, Wyatt-Smith, Ryan, & Doig, 1998; Cumming & Wyatt-Smith, 2001; Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 2003), including the literacies of Mathematics, together with additional insights from the report *Beyond the Middle* (Luke et al., 2003), in particular the finding that the teaching of such literacies was not apparent in any of the programs reviewed nationally.

Literacies in the curriculum, or curriculum literacies, are those literate capabilities needed to learn in the curriculum. Curriculum literacies interface with a body of knowledge such as a Key Learning Area or a subject. For example, in Science, students may need to write science reports after undertaking investigations or experiments. This requires using language systems including specialised text and language structures, vocabulary and graphics that are specific to constructing knowledge in Science and that may not be learnt in other areas of learning. If these literacy demands are left implicit and not taught explicitly, they provide barriers to learning (Cumming & Wyatt-Smith, 2001; Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 2001, 2003). Underlying the project's approach therefore was a keen interest in student engagement and quality learning opportunities, recognising that these inevitably hinge on teacher knowledge and expertise in curriculum planning, pedagogy and assessment, and more specifically, how these align (Wyatt-Smith & Bridges, 2006).

Clusters were encouraged to consider Key Learning Areas other than English in recognition of the significance that mastery of curriculum literacies has for improved outcomes for students and the fact that literacy is often seen to be the responsibility of the early childhood teacher or the English teacher (Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 2003). Irrespective of the chosen area, however, the intrinsic links common for all teachers as they engaged with the project were the critical links between learning areas and literacy, on one front, and on the other, the links or alignment between pedagogy and assessment, and more specifically, student outcomes.

Professional learning Contemporary research has provided several useful frameworks to draw upon in the conceptual design and development of the Queensland Project. Four studies were of direct relevance and these are considered in brief in this section.

Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) identified that effective professional development must focus on deepening teachers' understanding of the processes of teaching and learning and the students that they teach and has a number of characteristics:

- It must engage teachers in concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection that illuminate the processes of learning and development;
- It must be grounded in inquiry, reflection, and experimentation that are participant-driven;
- It must be collaborative, involving a sharing of knowledge among educators and a focus on teachers' communities of practice rather than on individual teachers;
- It must be connected to and derived from teachers' work with their students;
- It must be sustained, ongoing, intensive and supported by modelling, coaching, and the collective solving of specific problems of practice; and,
- It must be connected to other aspects of school change.
  (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, pp. 597-604)

Consistent with the points above, the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS) (Lingard et al., 2001) identified that professional learning needs to (a) engage practitioners in substantive conversations about the link between pedagogy and student outcomes, and (b) be about building a sense of responsibility and efficacy for student learning. Similarly, Lingard, Hayes, Mills and Christie (2003, p. 131) differentiated between effective professional learning communities that support a strong service ethic reflected in high expectations for student success and other communities of practice where low expectations of and aspirations for student achievements impact on what can be achieved.

Further, the report *Making Better Connections* (Downes et al., 2001) recommended that professional learning be: sustained, ongoing and intensive, and supported by modelling, coaching and collective problem solving around specific issues of practice. Given the one-year time frame for the project, two main forums were scheduled in March and May in Brisbane, each forum being for two days. The attendees included key personnel from each cluster or regional district, the Project Management team including representation from each of the three sectors as mentioned above, and academic specialists in the fields of literacy and assessment, numeracy, diversity and

inclusion. The forums were structured to include keynote presentations throughout the day, these having a focus on theoretical issues and understandings that were to inform classroom innovations in assessment and pedagogy. They also included opportunities for participants to engage in collective problem solving outside their local contexts, sharing their insights into how the new ideas presented in the forums connected to their local knowledge of classroom practice. A key feature of both forums was the explicit modelling of ideas in the understanding that these were directly relevant and transferable to the diverse local contexts. This approach was motivated by the fact that the key personnel attending the forums were a subset of the participants and that they would, in turn, model such ideas for classroom practice. In this way, the need for in situ coaching was incorporated recognising how such coaching needed to be responsive to local conditions, communities and educational practices.

Based on findings from the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (Lingard et al., 2001), Lingard, et al. (2003) argued that because individual teacher practices, including both pedagogies and assessment, are the most significant school-level variables for enhancing student outcomes, effective leadership must be concerned first and foremost with "spreading the best teacher practices across the work of the school" (Lingard et al., 2001, p. 53). This study cued the project team into the need for strong visible leadership in clusters and in schools, where leadership was taken to mean being with and supportive of the teacher participants as they engaged in the risky-business of rethinking and reforming their pedagogic and assessment practice.

Silcox, Cavanagh and MacNeil (2004) also argued that a principal's role in renewal is about creating and facilitating conditions under which teachers and the community can critically reflect on learning and teaching practices in order to improve student outcomes (Silcox et al., p. 15). The principal's knowledge of pedagogy and curriculum are essential ingredients in this regard.

Finally, the project's design resonated with the recent work of Hayes, Mills, Christie and Lingard (2006) who proposed three focal points around which to coordinate policy, practice and funding (Hayes et al., p. 204). First was a focus on pedagogy and assessment as a key nodal point for innovative change, school renewal and curriculum reform; second, was the development of school leadership focused on pedagogical leadership and the core business of schools rather than managerially focused leadership focused on restructuring, micro-management and systems development. Finally, they recommended that there be an investment in teachers including the development of teacher professional learning communities with a focus on aligning assessment, pedagogy and curriculum. The 2005 project had enacted this latter principle, in part, by devolving funds to clusters to support local professional learning, including teacher release time, as previously mentioned.

Educational disadvantage The project supported the *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century* (Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 1999) in relation to the target group by facilitating the development of classroom practice that valued, and responded to, diversity. The project took as a starting point the need for distinguishing diversity from deficit and, in particular, the importance of moving away from nebulous terms such as "students with learning difficulties". As part of the project, teachers were asked to collect and interpret a range of classroom assessment data and school-based student enrolment data to inform themselves about student needs. A central tenet at play in the project was that teachers and students would benefit from teachers having direct access to information about the diverse learners in their classrooms, their interests, skills, knowledge and experiences both in and out of school.

Teacher assumptions were therefore of prime interest to the project team. These were taken to relate to students' prior knowledge and readiness to proceed, as well as to the matter of what counts as valued knowledge in school learning – what would be taken as a valued and therefore valorised display of achievement in the classroom. As noted earlier, the report *Beyond the Middle* (Luke et al., 2003) claimed that while diversity in student population was one of the most significant challenges facing teachers in the middle years, programs tended to be psychologically driven with a focus on "the adolescent" thus largely ignoring student diversity:

> There is a risk of creating a meta-narrative that homogenises students according to biological and psychological paradigms within a single category of "adolescents" despite one of the goals of middle schooling movement – to move towards understanding young people as different and diverse . . . There is effectively a gap in the research that is cognisant of which students the research is referring to . . . the very push for middle schooling is in part a response to the new demographics, cultures and student bodies of New Times. (Luke et al., p. 26)

The report's national scan of programs revealed a largely remedial, basic-skills focus with little evidence that programs had impacted in a significant way across the curriculum to change mainstream classroom pedagogy. The report *Beyond the Middle* (Luke et al., 2003) found that those educational communities that had come to grips with the social facts of diversity were the most successful at developing innovative, challenging and powerful approaches to mainstream pedagogy for middle years "at risk" students. These schools recognised multiple and intersecting forms of at-riskness and that whole-school mainstream pedagogy and curriculum programs needed revision and modification to improve outcomes for target group students (Luke et al., p. 5). In line with the findings from the report *Beyond The Middle*, project schools were encouraged to consider the specificity of their school community, that is,

respond to diversity rather than homogenising students through labels such as adolescents or students with learning difficulties.

Part 3: Boundary crossing for professional learning

In recognising the need for the project to work at local, sector and statewide levels, the Project Management Team took a keen interest in the production, distribution and circulation of knowledge at play in the project. Of special interest was the potential for installing modes of operation and communication that fostered "boundary crossings". Consistent with this notion was a recent US report on an initiative in urban school renewal entitled, *Crossing Boundaries: The Urban Education Imperative* (American Association of State Colleges and Universities & National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (AASCU & NASULGC), 2004) that detailed six dimensions that combined to establish new systemic partnerships enabling boundary crossings. These were: levels of leadership; attention to context; shared responsibility; ambitious goals; shared accountability; and systemic redesign (AASCU & NASULGC, pp. 13-24). The task force report acted as a practical guide to support collaborations across urban schools, universities, and communities aiming for educational reform. Their leadership model described levels of layered leadership and the role of "boundary spanners" who connect and hold the systemic partnerships together through a complex web of networks employing their skills and expertise to sustain the collaborations (AASCU & NASULGC, p. 30). While the US focus differed from that of the 2005 Queensland Project, the notions of layered leadership and boundary spanners were common.

Further, while the intent of the project was to provide clear and structured guidance, it also worked to facilitate local initiatives, intentionally remaining responsive to emerging priorities and local needs and interests. So, a clear aim in conceptualising the project's professional learning and leadership model (see Figure 2) was to identify boundaries related to roles, relationships and space. Also central was the move to construct layered leadership roles and boundary spanning roles (see Figure 3). This was in recognition of how intersectoral collaboration for most participants was unchartered territory and that it was more appropriate for them to initiate actions, groupings and ways of interacting that were responsive to local contexts and school priorities.

This deliberate application of layered leadership and boundary spanners was accomplished through focussed attention on a) the support provision at each layer and associated responsibilities; b) the communication modes adopted over the life of the project, and c) the project reporting and accountability processes. The conceptual model and the modes of communication employed are discussed next.

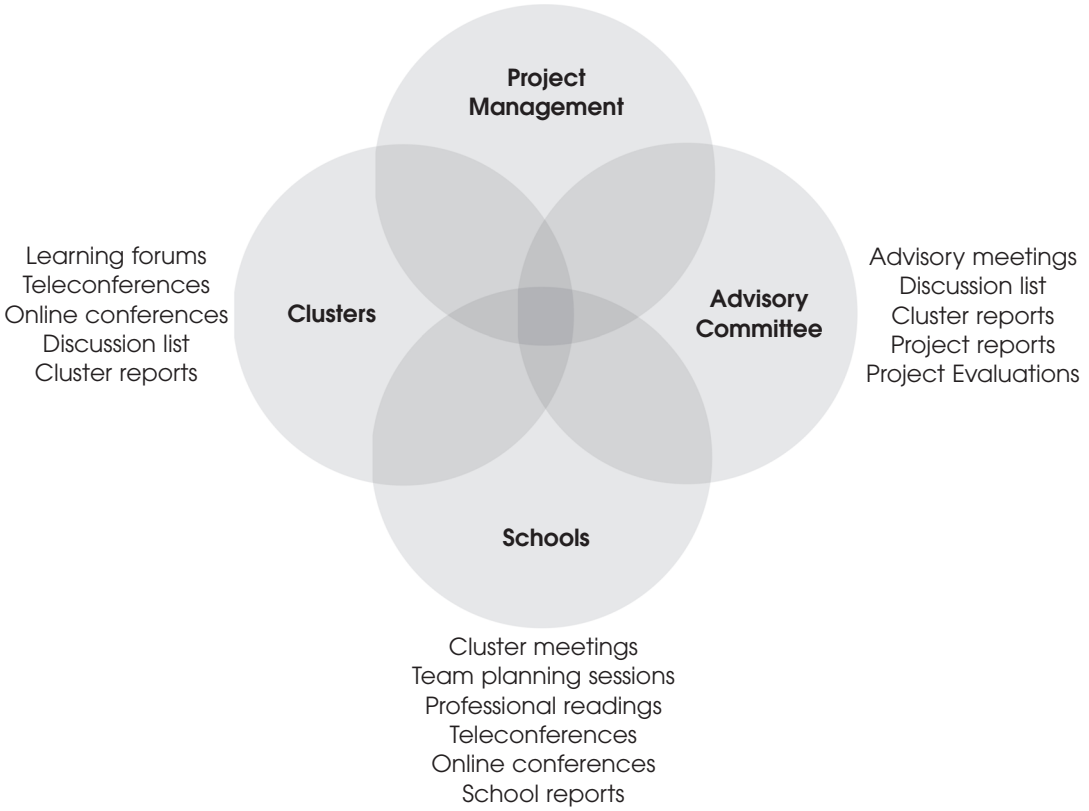

Figure 2: Boundary crossing professional learning and leadership model

Model overview and description of roles The professional learning and leadership model illustrated in Figure 2 built on the finding that effective teachers and good pedagogies make the single biggest difference to student outcomes (Lingard et al., 2003). Also foundational was the understanding that effective leadership is necessary at system, school and professional learning community level to support and sustain effective classroom practices. Such practices must be supported by principals and other leaders who must spread the best teacher practices across the work of the school and stretch and disperse leadership across tasks and people within schools (Lingard et al., 2003). To do this they must be more than managers, they must take a deep interest in the core business of the classroom, that is, assessment, teaching and learning (Lingard et al., 2003).

The conceptualisation of the model was informed by three major premises. First, project participants were collaborators working within and across sectors and systems building local and state-wide learning communities, mentioned earlier. Second, project teachers needed time for professional development, time for critical planning and reflection within professional learning communities and time to prepare and

critically evaluate their classroom practice. Third, project participants were accountable for their individual and collective professional learning and for evaluating its effectiveness.

The model constructed a leadership network within and across system and local participants. The administrative roles of this network are illustrated in Figure 3 below. The roles of Project Manager, Project Officer and Academic Adviser were created to manage and guide the project providing systemic and scholarly support for the clusters with their duties deliberately constructed to span existing boundaries of space and systems. The Project Manager and Project Officer were housed within the state sector. The Project Manager's responsibilities included: project liaison with DEST and across the state educational sectors, including Advisory Committee operations; budget and staff management; liaison with the Academic Adviser to ensure quality planning, implementation and evaluation; providing professional advice to inform project discussion lists; quality reporting; and National Forum representation. The Project Officer was accountable to the Project Manager and was responsible for: organising professional forums; managing communications; cluster liaison and support; facilitating intercluster collaboration and sharing; managing and contributing to reporting processes. The employment of a senior academic as Academic Adviser and "critical friend" to the project, ensured that there was a seamless alignment between the research informing the project and the project professional learning processes. These three roles operated as boundary-spanners (AASCU & NASULGC, 2004) establishing and enhancing webs of professional relationships across leadership levels from Advisory Committee to classroom teachers.

The three project management roles were supported by a Project Advisory Committee with constituent members including representatives from: (a) each of the three operating educational sectors; (b) university academics with specialist expertise in middle years, literacy, numeracy, and educational disadvantage; (c) the state assessment authority; and (d) the Australian Government Department of Education and Training. The Advisory Committee provided critical and strategic feedback and feedforward throughout implementation and the reporting phases, meeting on multiple occasions each timed at strategic junctures.

The local leadership networks were constructed at "cluster" level. Each cluster was required to appoint a Project Advocate and a Cluster Facilitator (see Figure 3). The Project Advocate role was that of curriculum leader, usually a principal in the cluster who had the capacity to support the project at cluster level and facilitate interest in project outcomes at the district and system level. The Cluster Facilitator was usually a district educational advisor with expertise in the alignment of assessment, pedagogy and curriculum. Representatives from cluster schools decided who would perform

these roles. The roles of Cluster Facilitator and Project Advocate were mirrored at each school site; the team leader and principal at the school level facilitated and supported professional learning of project teachers in school teams.

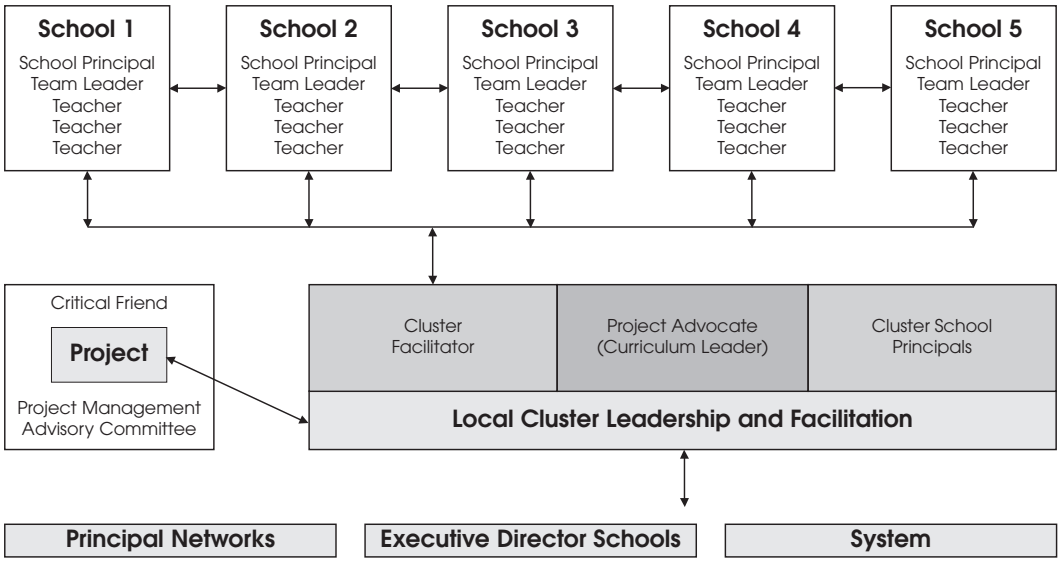

Figure 3: Layered leadership framework

Dissemination of professional learning was structured through a mentoring approach. Cluster Facilitators and Advocates from each cluster as well as sector representatives engaged in two professional learning forums as described previously. The Academic Adviser developed and delivered professional learning at both project forums with the Project Manager and Project Officer. This ensured intellectual rigor and a strong research-practice-policy link. This collaboration and delivery were also key elements of the boundary crossing process. Forum processes were carefully planned so that Cluster Facilitators and Project Advocates could adapt the program and deliver professional learning programs appropriate to local cluster needs. This approach strengthened the knowledge and skills of administrators and key district personnel and, at the same time, enabled the project team to provide substantial resources to each cluster for professional learning and reflection in school project teams.

Professional learning communities Professional development often focuses on the knowledge, skills and dispositions of individual teachers. While the project design recognised this, it also acknowledged that it was important to provide time and space for professional learning in on-site professional learning communities. Thus, teachers were in-serviced at local cluster forums, planned collaboratively in professional learning communities and worked by themselves in classrooms. The following principles

adapted from Lingard et al. (2000) informed the development of professional learning communities in schools:

- Data driven, theory and research-based programs;
- Substantive conversations about the link between student outcomes and pedagogy;
- Reflective collaboration amongst teachers around the link between their pedagogies/assessment and student learning outcomes;
- Sharing and reflecting on practice;
- Focus on teacher professional development and learning with emphasis on teaching and learning in particular school communities;
- Coherence across school programs;
- Productive leadership that encourages innovation and risk-taking with a focus on teaching and learning;
- Substantial connections to other schools;
- Substantial connections with school communities;
- Collaborative work with universities or systems; and,
- Collaboration with professional associations.

Principals and Project Advocates at both school and cluster level were asked to ensure that teachers could focus on the core business of alignment of assessment, curriculum and pedagogy, while they, as curriculum leaders, considered other factors called "satellite issues" that might impact on the long term sustainability of improved outcomes for educationally disadvantaged students and transferability of professional learnings. Examples of such factors are identified in Figure 4.

Feedback from school principals and Project Advocates indicated that the uptake of a sub-set of these issues and the relative emphasis given to them varied from site to site. For example, one Principal recognised that a more sophisticated understanding of student and community experiences was necessary if assessment, pedagogy and curriculum were to demonstrate strong connectedness and intellectual rigour. She committed to the development of more meaningful community profiles in future planning. Another Principal recognised that project teachers had self-selected and were highly motivated with a strong sense of responsibility for student learning. He believed that all teachers in his school needed to understand that they could make a difference and that it was his responsibility to cultivate a "no blame" culture in his school community where *all* teachers felt a sense of responsibility for *all* students learning. In

a number of clusters, Principals across schools established their own professional learning communities where they engaged in substantive conversations about teachers' core business and their role in supporting this. These conversations informed planning in relation to future middle years initiatives at district and regional level.

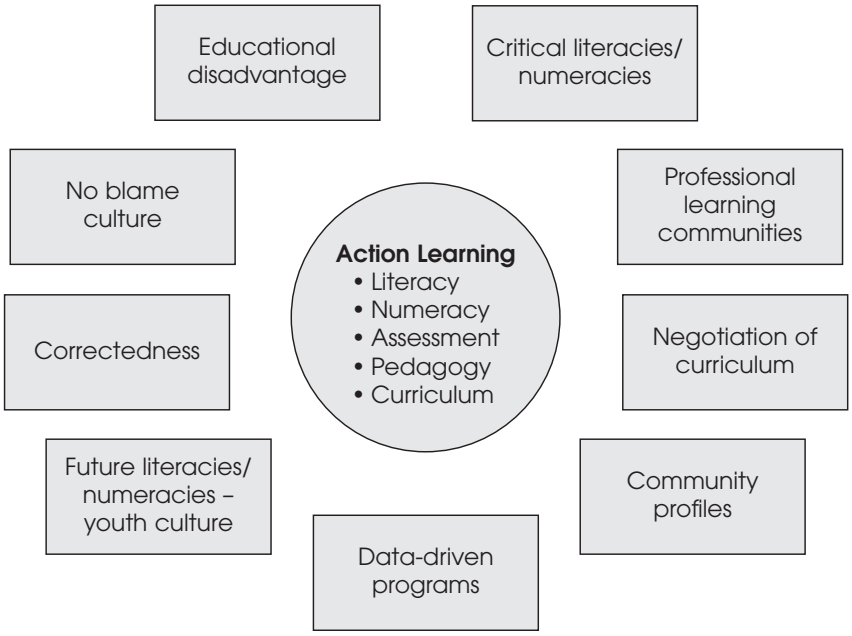

Figure 4: Examples of factors impacting on long-term sustainability and transferability of learnings

Professional learning across boundaries The building of professional learning communities across the boundaries of space and systems was enhanced by the multiple modes of communication. The project discussion list played an important role in facilitating learning across clusters. As part of their contractual agreement, Cluster Facilitators and Project Advocates were required to provide monthly updates on the project discussion list managed by the Project Officer and the Project Manager. Initially, participants detailed their progress and outlined emerging barriers to success. Within a few weeks, however, the discussion list provided a vital forum for the participants, taking on a life of its own independent of participation requirements from the project team. It facilitated exchange of planning tools, professional learning ideas, professional readings, and ideas about developing assessment tasks and standards. Throughout the project, the Project Officer posted comments and advice provided by the management team and Advisory Committee members. This mix of formal postings and teacher-initiated contributions meant that (a) participants felt that they owned the discussion list space and (b) clear and consistent messages were provided across the groups. Beyond this, participants generated a sense of project

community that was inclusive of the 15 clusters, and enabled insights to be given about how the project was locally enacted.

Additionally, regular teleconferences were held between the Project Manager, Project Officer, Cluster Facilitators and Project Advocates to reflect on the project and its progress and to address challenges faced by project teams. This enhanced the web-based mode of interaction and allowed for elaborations and clarifications of email postings and on site experiences. The teleconferences were also a source of data for project reflection and evaluation.

The use of online interactive technology as part of the Project's Evaluation Strategy also facilitated cross-cluster professional learning through virtual conferencing. Three online workshops were held to explore and support professional learning. A distinguishing feature of these workshops was the use of technology to enable simultaneous, cross-site interactions. Simultaneous on-screen postings were teamed with teleconferencing to create an online meeting including teleconference with participants interacting across geographically dispersed sites in a virtual environment. This technology enabled the project management team, facilitators, advocates and teachers from across the State to reflect on professional learnings together and to post project work on screen to facilitate collaborative cross-cluster professional conversations about project outputs and outcomes. Readers interested in this are advised to see (Wyatt-Smith & Bridges, 2007).

The final element in the project's design was the state-wide Teachers Forums held at the end of the project. This was the first time that project teachers from across the State had met face-to-face. These forums provided teachers with time and opportunity to present and critically reflect upon their professional learnings and to develop principles that could inform the alignment of assessment, curriculum and pedagogy across cluster and sectors. These Forums were integral to the shared speaking about and celebration of project outcomes. They functioned as a space for teachers to share stories of success and examples of innovations that occurred in their particular contexts. It was in these forums that teachers came together from across sites and could hear one another using the metalanguage of assessment and pedagogy developed during the project. Many came to the realisation that as a result of their experiences, they were well placed to be leaders in their schools and districts, able to competently deliver professional development for middle schooling teachers about the alignment of assessment, curriculum and pedagogy.

Issues of implementation

In the remainder of this paper we move now to consider some key issues that emerged in the course of the project and that pertain to further implementation of the

model and framework. These are issues of participant selection and parity of provision.

Selection of project schools Schools that did not self-nominate or withdrew from the project indicated that they felt their teachers were already over-committed to other curriculum and professional learning initiatives. Prioritising professional learning initiatives is a difficult decision for schools. Relevance, currency and manageability in terms of staff demands were critical issues for schools when considering nominating. Given the short time to implement, evaluate and report, it was pragmatic to call for cluster nominations from already established networks. Some of the clusters provided evidence of working relationships with schools from the other sectors and had already approached these schools to join the project. In other cases, officers from the private sectors selected schools that had submitted expressions of interest.

While intersectoral discussions were generally seen as productive, some private sector schools felt that they were "outsiders", particularly as they approached the project with different conceptualisations of literacy, numeracy, assessment and, to some extent, disadvantage. While the Academic Adviser ensured that professional learning was appropriate for all three sectors, teachers from different sectors were not always on the "same page" in professional conversations about assessment. Facilitators from a number of clusters observed that the disparate professional development that schools from each sector had experienced, produced gaps in professional understandings that were difficult to bridge in the short time frame. In reflecting on the conceptual model (see Figure 2) and leadership framework (see Figure 3), it became evident that while the principles of boundary spanning and layered leadership had taken account of project participants' roles, it had not attended sufficiently to the possible impact of how teachers worked with one another across sectors. Essentially, participants were not given advice about how to engage with one another across the boundaries of the different sectors. This was the case even though each of the sectors was strongly supportive of the project. The insight for the project team was that future applications of the model and framework would need to provide guidance on how to facilitate and achieve quality cross-sectoral sharing of professional learning.

Parity of provision Project leaders in rural and remote areas faced specific difficulties. In such locations, many principals teach classes and this means that the time they had to dedicate to project work was sometimes limited. It was also more difficult for these clusters to find suitable facilitators and to access quality critical friends. This suggests that more consideration needs to be given to ways in which to support the professional learning communities of schools in rural and remote locations. One Project Advocate from a rural and remote cluster has proposed that

future projects involving rural and remote schools should consider funding a suitably qualified person as a critical friend to the project in the cluster rather than pure allocation of grant money. Additionally, it was not always possible for all participants in rural and remote clusters to meet and share their professional learnings. This was due to significant distances between project schools and a lack of staff in rural and remote communities to cover teacher release. One cluster noted that geographic isolation meant that teachers had to travel for a whole day or even stay in overnight accommodation in order to attend a two-hour professional development session. One rural cluster developed a strategy to overcome the problem of geographic barriers to regular face-to-face meetings. They had already established links with critical friends and with the local Indigenous education professional learning centre. In addition, professional and collaborative learning was enabled through:

- Cluster meetings held at the local town each term with participants flown in from remote areas;
- Professional readings disseminated via post/email for background and reflection;
- E-mail contact when needed to clarify expectations, give feedback and share learnings;
- Follow-up tasks completed at school sites between meetings;
- Reporting tasks at following meetings, with a process for reflection and feedback embedded in each meeting; and,
- Critical friends providing feedback to individuals on project materials via email.

Before concluding this paper, some comment should be made about future directions for professional learning and leadership.

Lessons learned and future directions Both the conceptual model and leadership framework described in this paper had a built-in mix of interaction opportunities, including those relating to face to face small group and large forums, online conferencing, and teleconferencing. In reflecting on the project design, a key insight is that such a mix is vital in rethinking professional learning and leadership as situated practice in which old and new technologies can play a part. Also evident was how learning can be networked at local and system levels to optimise sharing of experiences in diverse pedagogical and assessment contexts. Further work needs to be undertaken to explore how professional learning communities could be established and sustained over time and across distance using, for example, videoconferencing facilities connected to hubs located in universities and schools.

Some work of this type has been undertaken in the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the early evidence is that technology can be used to provide the vital links between teachers, students, and university personnel in furthering learning (Yeager & Elder, 2005).

Further research is also needed into the utility of the outlined model and framework for supporting professional learning in projects and sites beyond those included in the work reported here. There is also a clear need for investigating the longitudinal application of these, given their reliance on a wide range of personnel, cluster formation and the flow-through of funding to local levels.

While the strength of the claims about the model and framework presented here are necessarily cautious, overall the project team can report that they facilitated teachers' learning. Essentially, they provided a supportive environment for opening spaces for critical conversations about what counts as quality pedagogy and assessment. As the paper has highlighted, the model and framework were deliberately configured as both multi-layered and dynamic. Their starting proposition was that professional learning and leadership approaches need to be reconceptualised, not just band-aided. There is no doubt that the project's design was ambitious and risk-taking. However, in the words of several participants across the sites, "It works", with one participant reporting that the overall design was "the best professional development model" that he had experienced as a school principal and curriculum leader.[4]

Endnotes

[1] The project brief was managed by Education Queensland (EQ) in conjunction with The Association of Independent Schools, Queensland Inc (AISQ) and the Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) under The Department of Education, Science and Training *Grants for National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies and Projects Programme*. Academic staff from Griffith University's Centre for Applied Language, Literacy and Communication Studies were contracted to act as critical friends (Wyatt-Smith) and project evaluators (Wyatt-Smith & Bridges) from November 2004 to February 2006.

[2] Christine Ludwig, Maree Hedemann and Mary Neville, Education Queensland.

[3] Professor Claire Wyatt-Smith, Griffith University.

[4] We invite readers to contact us, should they be interested in subsequent papers.

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