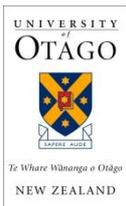# Professional Learning and Development Practice

Professional Learning and Development Practice

Introduction

Key features of the current model of professional learning and development (PLD) include: the introduction of the student achievement function in regional Ministry of Education (Ministry) offices, designed to broker PLD for schools; the change to competitive tendering for providers for all Ministry of Education contracts; a targeted approach focussing on priority schools and learners; greater emphasis on culturally responsive pedagogy; and an unrelenting focus on accelerated academic achievement for priority learners. Schools are identified as needing PLD support by the Ministry through their achievement results (national standards, NCEA) or they self-identify through a review process. This paper considers the strengths and weaknesses of these current approaches.

There are three questions to ask when considering the efficacy of strategic policy as it is put into practice. The first is whether the strategic policy itself is right? That is do we want to do the right things for the right reasons? The second is whether the mechanics (operational policy) of putting that strategic policy into practice are correct? That is are we doing the right things in the most effective way to ensure success? And, finally, how do we know we are doing the right things in the most effective way?

As discussed in the first paper, the approach to PLD being implemented in New Zealand schools has strong theoretical and empirical foundations, as identified through the Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) and other international literature. The focus on teacher quality and student achievement, the drive for culturally responsive practices, the inclusion of iwi and the community and locating PLD in the workplace are all well supported as productive mechanisms for accelerating the learning of students who have not been as well served by the current education system. This approach is predicated on the following chain of influence: if the elements of effective professional learning are supported, the quality of teaching and school leadership will be improved and, as a result, student achievement will be raised, promoting higher performance across the system. Further, if the professional support provided is targeted to those most in need, it is assumed that there will be improved equity.

The model in practice involves: a focus on quality teaching and student outcomes at classroom and school level; a clearly articulated strategic direction and theory of action; a focus on developing networks of practice; accessing external expertise; building the capability of instructional leadership. Importantly, there is also a commitment to ensuring that iwi, hapū, rūnanga and whānau are engaged in the design and sometimes the delivery of PLD. The primary role of the PLD provider is to work in partnership with a school to support its ongoing self-review and inquiry processes, working collaboratively with teachers and principals to build the capability of a school to accelerate student achievement. This approach requires facilitators to act as adaptive guides, mentors and coaches.

However, implementing theories of action in complex systems is not straightforward and, in practice, there will be strengths and weaknesses to any approach. Measuring effectiveness can be difficult within a complex system where factors interact and where causality is difficult to determine.

The following summarises the key strengths and weaknesses of current approaches as they play out in practice.

Strengths

The targeting of PLD towards priority schools and priority learners optimises use of a limited resource

2. *The focus on achievement data* ensures that learning is at the centre of the PLD and that more focussed conversations with teachers and leaders are possible as part of the self-review and inquiry process.

3. *Facilitators work beside teachers as facilitators and guides* in specific areas acting as a mirror to their practice. This provides supported opportunities for teachers and leaders to reflect on their practice and its impact on student learning. An external perspective enables analysis of the problems of practice so that the leaders and teachers are able to avoid the trap of their current perspective itself being the problem.

4. *It is a contestable commercial model* which helps ensure greater accountability for providers to make a perceptible difference to student achievement. The competitive nature of tender processes means providers cannot afford to be complacent. This has led to improved reporting and a greater focus on outcomes rather than outputs.

5. *Strengthening the shift towards culturally responsive pedagogies* has led to increased partnership with iwi and local communities. This has meant greater involvement in education by Maori organisations, including direct commercial partnerships between Māori and PLD providers.

6. *The Ministry is more involved in PLD at a local area* than in the past. Greater use is made of the extensive local data available through national standards and NCEA. Localised decision making provides an opportunity for greater local knowledge to be utilised.

7. The model has encouraged *providers of PLD to establish new collaborations* which has helped to strengthen practices through sharing collective expertise, investing in building facilitator knowledge and learning from well designed monitoring and evaluation.

8. Provider collaborations have often been on a scale that has enabled *investment in research, evaluation and statistical support* which has demonstrated the impact of PLD on student achievement and supported the building of knowledge about quality practice.

Weaknesses

The strengths identified above are primarily related to the mechanics of the approach as independent elements of PLD; the weaknesses tend to relate to unintended consequences deriving from changes made to the delivery model or to the way in which different elements interact. They also relate to capability across the system.

1. *The very targeted approach limits professional support to only some schools*. The model appears to assume that all priority learners and teachers in need of support are in low decile schools. In reality, this is not the case. Further, *all* teachers and leaders need differentiated opportunities for professional learning if they are to stay motivated and current in their practice. Raising achievement requires improvement across the entire system.

2. *The time allocated* to any one school may be insufficient to support the changes required. There is considerable pressure on providers to exit their assigned PLD schools as quickly as possible, preferably within one year (or perhaps two if the situation is particularly challenging).

3. *The allocation system used by the Ministry* is based on an evaluation against a set of prescribed criteria. This does not always work nor does it appear to be consistently applied

across the country. In some cases PLD providers work with schools and teachers who do not meet the criteria for PLD. This is due to either a lack of local knowledge in the Ministry and/or insufficient demand from schools which, perhaps, do not want to identify as 'failing'. Overall the allocation process is not efficient with insufficient resource in some areas and underused resource in others.

4. *The different purposes for the* targeting of *PLD are not well understood.* In some cases this is viewed as remediation rather than enhancement. This is most evident for PLD that is implemented where schools are perceived as needing help, rather than supporting the improvement journey which all schools should be on.

5. *The nature of the data used to identify schools and measure success has narrowed the PLD.* The intense focus on literacy and mathematics has meant some marginalisation of the curriculum. Standardised data can sometimes be privileged over other 'valued student outcomes' with the associated risk that schools may focus on those areas of learning where success can be readily measured.

6. For secondary schools, there is a question of *accessibility to specific subject support.*

7. *Pressure to show immediate gains in standardised measures can act as a barrier to innovation and shifts in practice.* Superficial changes to practice can be easily made, particularly in a high accountability model. Embedding deeper changes so that these become a normalised part of a teacher's daily work, is more difficult.

8. *PLD is only one part of a much wider system working towards raising the quality of teachers, yet it is measured as if it is stand-alone.* The moderating influences of other initiatives and their possible cumulative effect (negative or positive) is not always considered. Further, the reporting system is not coherent or longitudinal; it has changed over time and not all providers report the same things in the same ways.

9. *More than one provider can be working in a school at a time*. This has resulted in issues within schools being compartmentalised e.g. leadership, community, literacy, mathematics, science when schools often need a more coherent change process. It also highlights the added complexity and communications issues which arise from a Ministry brokered model sometimes involving a number of providers.

10. *The Ministry is now the portal through which schools access supplementary support.* However, the relationship between the Ministry and schools can be difficult, particularly if a school is seen as not achieving to expectations. This can make it hard for schools to approach regional offices for support. Further, ways in which schools can access supplementary support (eg the Ministry website) can be difficult to navigate.

11. *Current provider funding arrangements make it difficult to build long term PLD facilitator capability.* Facilitators, most of whom come out of schools, need time and support to develop expertise as mentors, guides and coaches (as opposed to disseminators of their own practice). The short term nature of PLD contracts makes such development difficult to

provide. Further, many talented educators do not see facilitation as a viable career option due to the lack of long-term job security or career progression.

Conclusion

Darling-Hammond (2010) argues that in order for the teaching profession to progress there needs to As this discussion of the strengths and weaknesses shows, elements of the current approach are strong and fit for purpose. However, in practice the model is often problematic. What is highlighted, is the danger of employing a simple process-product model and expecting it to work in a complex system, even where that model has strong theoretical and empirical underpinnings. In a complex system, we can expect divergent outcomes from what is apparently 'good PLD' based on a set of predetermined elements or principles. This complexity means one size definitely does not fit all. There is a need to understand the moderating influences of a wide range of other factors on the PLD delivered, including diverse school contexts and how the many different facets of teacher education interact to develop quality teachers. There is also a need to be clear about what problems PLD is best designed to solve and those which it cannot solve.

In the final paper we draw upon our understanding of the field of professional development and learning and the dynamic environment in which we are operating, to propose ways to build on the current strengths of PLD.