Changing pedagogy and school culture through professional learning (Summary)

The aim of this project was to overhaul the Prep to Year 6 curriculum to introduce a student-led inquiry-based model. By implementing whole-school change to improve the school's traditional teaching and learning culture we believed we could create a positive impact for all students. We wanted to give students an equal voice and to provide an environment in which creativity, interpersonal skills, decision-making and problem-solving were given as much importance as literacy and numeracy.

Maximising professional learning (PL) for whole-school staff is an important strategy when undertaking action change for improved student learning. Teachers are the key to school improvement. Doyle (2004) asserts that collaboratively creating a community of learners amongst teaching staff provides the greatest opportunity to effect and sustain change. Further, Stoll (1999) considers engaging staff in sustained conversation around student learning leads to interdependence. Such conversations provide shared understanding about how to move forward; recognition that mistakes are learning experiences; and a model of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Ertesvåg et al., (2010) propose that implementing and sustaining change is dependent on leadership at many levels. In undertaking this project the challenge has been to change traditional teacher-centred curriculum delivery to the desired student-led inquiry-based model.

Our rural Catholic Primary school located in central Victoria has a student population of 160, 65% of which attract Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) funding. Forty of our students are Indigenous and 31 receive special needs funding. The school’s socio-economic status (SES) and its Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) place it at the lower end of the SES scale. We have seven classroom teachers.

As Principal I organised PL and assisted staff with the change process. Professional learning involved the whole staff in visiting a school with a similar cohort of students to observe inquiry-based, student-led and play-based learning and a follow-up visit by a smaller group of staff. Further PL was conducted in our school by key staff from the other school who worked with some of our staff. To advance our understanding on early childhood development, an expert on play-based learning was invited to address the whole-school staff. Regular professional reading and reflection was introduced, with teachers meeting in their teaching teams to discuss classroom implementation and to reflect on the process of change.

To monitor our progress towards a student-led inquiry-based model we undertook qualitative data collection involving semi-structured interviews with six staff and six students. The staff survey questions and one teacher’s responses are included in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School type</th>
<th>Co-educational P-6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>Under 250 students</td>
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### Table 1  
**Data collected from staff interviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What, if anything, has been your most significant learning over the past twelve months?</th>
<th>What, if anything, had had the greatest impact on your thinking and practice in the classroom?</th>
<th>What do you understand of the theory and philosophy that underpins some of our changes?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Students more engaged when working on a big task over a few weeks which requires a variety of skills  
• Less assumptions about what children have in their head in regards to content, work habits, skills and processes  
• Children will stop when they are full  
• Teacher role completely changed – children making decisions on what needs to be done  
• ‘Split screen teaching’ [i.e., including both tasks to complete, and skills and strategies required.] | • [School] visit crucial  
• 2nd visit was pivotal and [staff member] visit finally allowed “the old” to be let go  
• All staff getting the same message allowed it to stick  
• Bigger team allows for continued conversation | • Constructivism – Vygotsky  
• Children learn by sharing, doing and reflecting  
• Community of learners |

Student data showed how children’s learning opportunities and enthusiasm for learning were dramatically increased. The student survey questions and one student’s responses are included in Table 2.

### Table 2  
**Data collected from student interviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you noticed anything different about how you work in your classroom in the past year?</th>
<th>If you have noticed some changes, what do you think about these?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Teachers don’t give us lots of worksheets.  
• We do lots more SDL [self-directed learning] and get to choose when we do certain things during the day  
• We do lots more big things and are not in a little square anymore, but in a circle that is getting bigger and expanding. We learn lots of different ways to present things  
• The teacher isn’t saying you have to do this | • I really like it because there isn’t as much listening. We are out doing work the way we want to.  
• We have more space to do our own thing and learn more. |

Early physical changes to the classrooms showed a more relaxed, focused and interactive learning environment where teachers and students were equal partners in planning for maximising learning (Wilson, 2000). Students’ needs, views and passions were welcomed and enacted. Teachers saw that children could lead their own learning experiences. Removing traditional barriers to in-depth learning allowed for greater depth of learning and flexibility in tasks. The process, skills and strategies of learning took precedence over content. Our hallways are now full of displays of children’s work. No classroom teacher is working in isolation; rather teachers are sharing their learning space. Our assemblies now have students standing up and sharing what they are learning about, and we have classes visit different areas of the school to share their learning and to investigate one another’s teaching and learning. In short, our school has been totally transformed.

Engaging in professional conversation and collaboration resulted in more reflective listening (Bolton, 1979), and increased capacity to challenge one another and to disclose deficiencies and victories (Egan, 2007). The quality and depth of these professional learning conversations produced greater staff confidence, feedback and emotional support (Goleman et al., 2002) to continue working towards a better future for our children.
Variety in our professional learning, connecting with another school, discussing the difficulties of change, and distributed staff leadership (Harris, 2005) were success factors for placing students at the centre of their learning. We concentrated on moving forward and on creating safe and respectful learning environments for our staff and students (Wertheim et al., 2009). We developed a strong internal capacity to negotiate our own change.

Our PL has had a profound impact on the teaching and learning culture in our school. Considering the impact on change of the process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, our commitment is to continue refining and improving our teaching and learning practices, particularly with further reading and reflection on the philosophy and theory underpinning these practices. Future decisions will be based on well-grounded theories. Visiting schools and sharing our experience with other schools will form part of our continuing professional learning.

References


