

Developing a framework for professional learning programs in schools

Scott Eacott



A small-school study explores the strategies required for effective in-school professional development, and proposes a simple framework for future programs...

One of the key roles of educational leaders is the development of staff. Teachers are a vital resource within a school and improving their professional capacity is of immeasurable benefit to system administrators, school leaders, colleagues, students and the entire school community. Within the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET) the ability to develop strategies to enhance the performance and welfare of staff is one of eight general selection criteria for principal positions and enhancing the capacity of others is a key element of the NSW Leadership Capability Framework. In addition, the Professional Learning Policy provides schools with additional funds to support the ongoing professional growth of staff.

Of course, to fulfil their professional obligations, teachers at all levels need to remain up-to-date in terms of pedagogy and their field of specialisation¹. To maintain this level of currency, they need to engage actively in an explicit and systematic approach to continual professional learning. Today, there is greater recognition of this fact by teachers, school executives and system administrators. However, Fullan contends that the greatest problem faced by schools today is not resistance to innovation, but the fragmentation and overload of too many different innovations². This therefore invokes the question: how do school leaders best address the professional learning needs of their school staffs?

The research

Lord Howe Island Central School (LHICS) is a small isolated school within the NSW DET. It is located approximately five hundred kilometres east of Port Macquarie. The school has three full-time staff, a teaching principal and two classroom teachers. In addition it has access to three casual staff that fulfil a variety of teaching roles at the school. It is a unique school as all permanent staff members have limited tenures (two years for teachers and three years for principals). Considering the implications of the geographic isolation and continuous staff turnover, it was imperative that LHICS establish a framework for the continuous professional development of staff consistent with the school's future planning.

Using qualitative research methods, a recent study set out to investigate the provision of professional learning at this small school. Two core questions were posed:

- What strategies constitute an effective professional development program?
- Can these strategies be applied to construct a framework for

Briefly...

- School leaders have a responsibility to ensure school staff receive appropriate professional development.
- This article reports a small-scale study at an isolated NSW school which explored two questions:
 - What strategies constitute an effective professional development program?
 - Can these strategies be applied to construct a framework for effective

professional development programs?

- The study identified 'most effective' and 'least effective' strategies for professional development programs.
- The implications of these findings are explored and, from these considerations, an attempt is made to develop a simple framework which might be universally adopted to provide effective programs.

effective professional development programs?

Due to the relatively small size of the sample, a one-stage data gathering strategy was used. All teaching staff members, permanent and casual, participated in an in-depth interview using a semi-structured interview schedule based on the study's research questions. Teachers were briefed on the study and their role in it, prior to being interviewed individually.

Respondents' comments were recorded manually against the interview schedule. The data generated was then coded thematically to produce a data series for analysis against the study's key questions.

The findings

A detailed qualitative analysis of respondent's comments on the most and least effective strategies for professional development programs produced the results represented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Most effective strategies for professional development programs

Strategies for professional development programs identified as most effective	Number of times cited Total no. comments = 6
Background information or theory behind initiative	4
Model or demonstration of initiative in action	4
Opportunity to practise or test-out initiative	4
Personal feedback on performance of initiative	4
Ongoing support, teamwork, mentoring	4
Relevance to context	3
Linked to classroom practice	2
Bringing in experts in the field or specialisation	2
Involving everyone	2
Building on prior knowledge or practice	1
Workable quantities	1
Collaboratively planned, not imposed	1
Use of expertise on the staff and in the community	1

Table 2: Least effective strategies for professional development programs

Strategies for professional development programs identified as least effective	Number of times cited Total no. comments = 6
No practical applications	4
No support after initial training	3
One-off or generic programs	3
Not contextually relevant	3
Lecturing or passive learning	3
Computer/technology delivered learning	3
Too much theory	2
Packages to read and self-learn	2
Death by overhead or powerpoint	1
In own time	1
No background information	1
Overloaded programs	1

Within the scope of this small study, the findings reveal that some strategies are judged to be universally effective (e.g. the need to model or demonstrate an initiative in action, provide an opportunity to practise or test an initiative, and for personal feedback on performance). Other strategies are viewed as quite ineffective, a fact reflected reciprocally in terms of identified ineffective strategies (e.g. the need for ongoing support, teamwork, mentoring and support after initial training, links to

classroom practice and practicality). Other strategies are seen universally as being ineffective (e.g. one-off or generic programs, lecturing or passive learning, packages to read and self-learn, and computer/technology delivered learning).

The outcomes

The purpose of the study was to identify strategies which would make professional development programs for teachers contextually significant, linked to the school's strategic direction, mission and vision, and beneficial to classroom practice. In terms of one of the key aims of the study – to identify the strategies of professional development programs that are most effective – we now have a much clearer picture of how best to proceed.

The study demonstrated that there are a number of instructional and organisational factors that need to be considered if professional development programs are to be effective. Analysing the qualitative data indicates how LHICS (and other schools) might address and strategically improve professional development programs to support staff. The key findings on this issue are summarised below:

- Programs should provide an appropriate level of background information or theory on the initiative. This means that there should be an established need or reason for the change that is contextually appropriate and not imposed on the school. A delicate balance, however, is required in terms of the appropriate level of and too much theory, and similarly not enough.
- The facilitator of any new initiative should be able to offer to model or demonstrate that initiative in action. This will enable participants to see a link between the initiative and classroom practice and to eliminate the least effective strategy identified in the study (no practical classroom application).
- Within or following the process of modelling and demonstrating, there is a need to provide opportunities for participants to practise or test-out the initiative. Not only does this address the passive learning issue (one of the least effective strategies), it assists the participants to establish links to personal practice and build on their current knowledge and routine.
- To further enhance the success rate of the initiative, personal feedback is required on the participant's performance during the testing-out or practice phase. This provides the opportunity for participants to improve their performance under the guidance of an experienced practitioner or expert in the field or specialisation.
- To ensure successful implementation of the new initiative, there is a need for ongoing support after the initial training period. Accordingly, any program needs to be undertaken with a long-term goal or focus and not just as a one-off or generic training and development opportunity.
- Programs need to be contextually appropriate to the school in which they are being delivered. This requires professional development facilitators to know and understand the context of the school and the implications of their program for the entire school community.
- Additional instructional practices to consider include the need to build on participants' prior knowledge and practice; to involving everybody, thinking holistically about the school community; to present information in workable quantities; to plan collaboratively; to resist the imposition of learning initiatives; and to make use of programs that utilise the expertise of staff and the school community.
- Instructional practices that are best used minimally include lecturing and passive learning opportunities, packages for

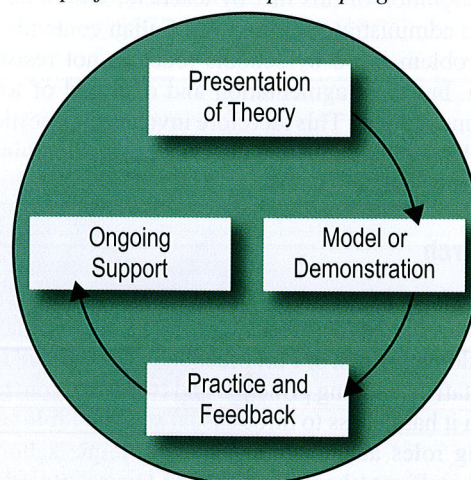
participants to read and self-learn, computer/technology-delivered training programs, using participants' personal time, and excessively overloaded programs.

The framework

In terms of the other key purpose of the study – to develop a framework for professional development programs – we now have a great deal of information to work with. Using the themes that were identified during the effective strategies phase of the study, a simple framework for the most productive delivery of professional development programs has emerged. Figure 1 is a diagrammatic version of that framework.

The framework for effective professional development programs is displayed as a four-step process. It is set within the confines of a circle representing the context of the school.

Figure 1: A framework for effective professional development programs



The initial process is the presentation of theory. This stage establishes the reason for the initiative and evidence (research, work samples) to support the undertaking of the initiative. The second step is the model or demonstration. During this stage, modelling or demonstrating the initiative in context supports the theory behind the initiative. This may, but not exclusively, include the use of video of classroom practice or worked samples. The third step is the practice or feedback stage. Building on the demonstration and modelling stage, participants are now given the opportunity to practise the initiative in simulated conditions or possibly in a structured classroom setting. The fourth and final step of the process is the longest running and arguably the most significant element for the long-term sustainability and success of the initiative. This is the ongoing support stage. In this regard, organisational systems and structures need to be designed to support the ongoing implementation of the initiative. These may include the allocation of additional funds, the provision of teacher time, or the purchase of new equipment to support the initiative.

Implications for school leaders and classroom practice

Presentation of theory

As a profession, educators read less professional literature than engineers, lawyers and physicians³, which is one reason why it is important to provide participants with the evidence or supporting research behind any new initiative. This process should assist with establishing the intent of the initiative. The

data from this study indicate, however, that there needs to be a delicate balance between presenting information and presenting too much theory or background information.

Model or demonstration

Successful professional development programs improve the knowledge, understanding and skills of participants⁴. While the presentation of theory assists with acquisition of knowledge, viewing a model or demonstration of the initiative heightens the participants' understanding. Importantly, it allows the participants to see the initiative in context.

Practice and feedback

The intention here is to allow participants to construct and produce a deeper understanding and embrace the necessary skills to execute the initiative in their work practice⁵. Law and Glover believe that professional development is best supported through interactive experiences⁶. Allowing participants to develop new competencies should have a positive correlation with their work behaviour⁷.

Constructive feedback, based on staff members practising the new initiative, allows individuals to benefit from learning while maintaining personal dignity⁸. Robertson and Allan argue that teachers need to be encouraged to discuss their practice with each other so that they can be challenged by new ways of knowing and develop new theories about their teaching⁹. Professional growth, add King and Newmann, is most likely when teachers have sustained opportunities to study, to experiment with and to receive helpful feedback on specific innovations¹⁰. Feedback or reflection on practice is essential if a teacher is to continue to develop and improve professional practice over time. The alternative is stagnation, even irrelevance.

Ongoing support

Research indicates that professional growth has an emerging quality and that the process takes substantial time¹¹. With teachers being the most expensive and crucial resource within schools, it makes sense to provide ongoing support for their professional growth. By ensuring professional development programs are tied to the school's strategic plan, it becomes easier to align organisational systems and structures to support the adoption of new initiatives.

Recommendations

Of course, the professional development framework originating from this small school study and the identification of effective strategies for professional development programs are far from fully developed.

The framework developed from this study is a heuristic device – a piece of knowledge capable of suggesting plausible actions to follow or implausible ones to avoid¹². The framework is open to revision, but it does, however, provide a way of thinking about professional development programs that can lead to further discoveries.

Based on the notion that the framework is heuristic, the

framework might be woven into future professional development programs. With future implementation will come further refinement and improvements to the concept.

LHICS provided an interesting, though small case study in terms of exploring the creation of effective professional development programs in schools. Clearly, a widening of the sample of schools and respondents would give a better insight into how best to meet the professional development needs of staff.

Future research needs to establish a contemporary understanding and realistic expectation of the role of professional development programs in schools. Professional development programs need to focus on lifelong learning and ongoing support rather than one-off training and development which it has come to mean for many professionals.

Only by embracing a series of systematic steps that are intrinsically motivated, as opposed to extrinsically imposed offerings, will the true beneficial capacities of professional development be realised at the school level. ■

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