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## **Harnessing Professional Dialogue, Collaboration and Content in Context: An exploration of a new model for Teacher Professional Learning.**

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This paper investigates a new model for teacher professional learning that harnesses professional dialogue, the power of collaboration and a series of teacher learning contents, which occur in the teacher's teaching context, for whole of school teaching practice effect. In more specific terms the paper examines the Collaborative Teacher Learning Model (CTLM) at St Augustine's Primary School for key points of reference. In examining the model the paper reveals a series of key elements, which when orchestrated through a process that teachers feel comfortable with, generates capacities for teachers to improve their teaching practices.



## **Introduction**

Schooling and the teaching practice of teachers have come into sharp focus in recent years (Hattie, 2011, 2009; Knight & Van der Zwan, 2013; Lynch, 2012). Changes in the global economy, powered by exponential technological growth and convergence, require new skills of workers, thus generating a call from various quarters (i.e. business and industry, government, think tanks) for a rethink on schooling and the teaching practices of the teachers (Lynch, 2012; Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Numerous reports such as OECD, 2013a; OECD, 2013b; MACER, 2004; and MCEETYA, 2008 indicate that education and training have positive effects on a nation's social outcomes and economic growth, and thus report them (education and training) as key drivers in a technologically rich global world. As technological innovation increases so too does the skill level required of the workforce (OECD, 2013a, 2013b). This circumstance has an effect on Government educational policy such that it implicates schools and their teachers for a commensurate response: a response which invariably questions the quality of the school's teaching. This is made more so by researchers, such as Hattie (2009), Marzano & Heflebower (2012) and Hargreaves & Fullan (2012), who argue that it is the quality of the teacher's teaching that matter when the goal is to enhance the learning gains for all students (Hattie, 2009). Therefore, teaching capability must be cultivated so students "gain the competencies and dispositions that will prepare them to be creative, connected, and collaborative life-long problem solvers" (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, p. 2).

The challenge for education systems then is *how to prepare teachers* for such a changed circumstance so that it delivers enduring skilling commensurate to high quality teaching. This paper proposes a model of teacher professional learning premised on coaching, mentoring and feedback, known as the *Collaborative Teacher Learning Model* (CTLM).

## **Teacher Professional Development**

Traditional approaches to teacher professional learning (or as it is known in the system of teaching, 'teacher professional development') are based on teachers being released from their classroom teaching duties to attend some kind of seminar or 'PD session'. These sessions are often on topics not directly related to the teacher and their specific teacher development needs,



but aligned to the strategic intent of an education system or the school as a whole. On another plane the prevailing teaching regulatory environment often mandates minimal teacher professional development hours, further strengthening the continuance of such approaches, which are largely viewed as efficient means (Avalos, 2011; Hanushek, 2005). In any case the resulting level of teacher skilling is ‘minimal at best’ and offer ‘nothing’ tangible once time passes and the teacher returns to the demands of their classrooms (Roseler & Dentzau, 2013; Avalos, 2011; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2001). As Taylor, Yates, Meyer & Kinsella (2011) argue, current professional development for teachers has “not necessarily acknowledged that teachers are not a homogeneous population but represent diverse perspectives, experience, expertise, receptiveness to new ideas, and potential for leadership roles” (Taylor et al., 2011, p.85). Further, Campbell & McNamara (2010), highlight the ability of teachers to be able to contextualise professional knowledge and learning if such professional development is to have an enduring positive change effect on teacher practice.

A review into the effective teacher professional development literature reveals three key themes. These themes are; *the role of professional dialogue* (Cheng & Winnie, 2012; Cochran-Smith and Donnell, 2006; Helmer, Bartlett, Wolgemuth & Lea, 2011), *the power of collaboration* (Ferguson-Patrick, 2010; Garet et al, 2001, Cohen & Hill, 2001; Anderson & Kumari, 2009; Aubusson, Steele, Dinham & Brady, 2007; Ferguson-Patrick, 2010; Glazer & Hannafin, 2006; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake & Olivier, 2008) and the *‘to be learnt’ content embedded in the teacher’s teaching context* (Ferguson-Patrick, 2010; Helmer, et al, 2011).

For reference purposes we briefly outline these three themes. Before we commence the discussion, it is important to emphasise that while we deal with each item individually, each relies on the others for effect in programs such as the CTLM and thus we argue in a later section that it is the orchestration of all three that represents the attributes of an effective teacher learning model. We turn first to the role of professional dialogue.

### 1. Professional Dialogue

While the premise of ‘teacher reflection’—where the teacher questions their own practice with a view to think differently about their classroom practice (Fullan, 1999)—has been described in the literature and evidenced in teacher behaviour over many years, there has been a movement in



more recent times towards the use of 'professional dialogue' in teacher learning activities. For clarification purposes, 'professional dialogue' differs from 'teacher reflection' in that while it involves teachers reflecting, it incorporates a teaching colleague as participant. Further it is designed to "feature the depiction of practice and scrutiny of different approaches in a critical and attentive manner" (Cheng & Winnie, 2012, p.326). Nelson et al. (2010), cited in Cheng and Winnie (2013, p 326), reports that in professional dialogue processes "teachers have to go beyond simply sharing practice, and that they have to emphasise investigating their practice in order to bring about positive changes to their teaching and pupils' learning". Research indicates that "there are good theoretical and empirical grounds to believe that *on-the-job participation* in reflective dialogue is an effective method for the professional development of teachers" (Kruiningen, 2013, p.110). While professional dialogue has similarities to that of a 'critical friend', a further difference is the incorporation of 'teacher collaboration' and a joint commitment on behalf of teachers in the arrangement to work together to effect change in each other's practice (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009). It is from collaboration that the elements of coaching and mentoring have their genesis in the CTLM.

## 2. Collaboration

'Collaborative teacher approaches' are the antithesis of what can be termed 'the traditional approach' to classroom teaching. In the traditional teacher world a classroom teacher works in a single classroom environment--- solo as it were-- doing their teaching work. While they may engage in teacher reflection with a view to improving their practice, the premise of collaboration is minimal and where it does exist, it is focused largely on whole school functions and events (Lynch, 2012,). 'Feedback' of any kind is neither sort out nor is it well received when it is suggested, a reflection of the 'private' or 'closed' culture that exists in the traditional teacher approach (Baskerville & Goldbatt, 2009). The reasons for this circumstance are involved and beyond the scope of this paper save to say, elements such as trust and professional dialogue--- key elements--- are negated by the privatised nature of the one teacher, with a closed door in a single classroom situation (Costas & Kallick, 1993).

'Collaborative teacher approaches' can thus be described as teaching environments where the boundaries of teacher work have been challenged and thus redefined (Madden, 2012). While the notion of teachers jointly teaching is not new, the premise of two or more educators taking joint



responsibility for the planning, teaching, and monitoring of the success of a cohort of students (i.e. a complete year level and multi curriculum areas therein) as well as the teaching performance of each other is new (Plinter, , Iuzzini & Banks, 2011; Zhou, et al, 2011). In these arrangements, professional dialogue becomes a critical feature because it is through such processes that teachers begin to share ideas, harness capacities and experiences, take calculated risks, try something new; knowing all the time they will be supported and guided by their fellow teachers in their goals for teaching improvement. The additional collaboration capacity such arrangements represent is an added feature that encourages teachers to be involved. Further, as Plinter et al (2011, p. 44) argue, “teachers when collaborating in such ways, develop:

1. an awareness and understanding of self in relation to socially constructed identities,
2. an awareness and understanding of self in relation to a collaborator’s socially constructed identities, and
3. a shared awareness and understanding developed by collaborating faculty of the potential impact of their identities and their students’ identities on the processes of teaching and learning” .

Taken together, teacher collaborative approaches expand the professional learning of teachers but also the potential for authentic student learning (Plinter et al, 2011; Cheng & Willie, 2013).

### 3. Learning Teaching Content in Context

According to researchers, such as Opfer & Pedder (2011) and Wayne, et al, (2008) professional learning developed to meet, for example, ‘minimal teacher registration hours’ and focused to systemic priorities --- the traditional approach --- is insufficient when collaboration and professional dialogue predominate the teacher culture. Opfer & Pedder (2011) go on to assert that “teacher learning must be conceptualized as a complex system rather than as an event” (Opfer & Pedder 2011, p.378). By this they suggest “one (has to) consider the sort of local knowledge, problems, routines and aspirations that shape or are shaped by individual practice” (Opfer & Pedder 2011, p.379) and thus design professional learning accordingly. Such teacher learnings must “recognize the overwhelmingly multicausal, multidimensional, and multicorrelational quality of teacher learning and its impact on instructional practices” (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 394). In simple terms, once professional dialogue and collaboration come into play the ‘learning content’ for teachers needs to match their context.



To this point we have argued that current teacher professional development approaches do not fit the aspirations of a reformed system of education. The brief review of literature reveals that three key elements lie at the heart of teacher professional learning in such an environment: professional dialogue, coupled with teacher collaboration, where the chief focus is the content to be learnt as applicable to the teacher's teaching context. The confluence of these three elements is exemplified in the 'Collaborative Teacher Learning Model' (or CTLM) embedded at Saint Augustine's Primary School, located in northern New South Wales, Australia.

Fullan and Langworthy (2014) argue that in models such as the CTLM, "partnering relationships, connecting student aspirations, the right kind of feedback and learning to learn are all essential in the new pedagogies because they set the context in which teachers can more deeply know their individual students and, through that analyse student progress to understand which teaching and learning strategies best activate an individual student's learning" (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, p. 19). Importantly, these strategies need to be integrated into teaching practices to engage students in their learning.

Having made these foundation comments we now turn to a detailed outline of the CTLM.

### **The Collaborative Teacher Learning Model**

In light of changes occurring in the global economy and the technological convergences that it embodies, Saint Augustine's Primary School has had a renewed focus on learning. This has resulted in a teaching philosophy that argues 'the teacher', like their students, has also to be a continuous learner. It is further argued that it is through such a philosophy that the teacher comes to fully appreciate the learning circumstance of their students (Madden, 2012). Taking this philosophy one step further the CTLM essentially works to enable the teacher to improve their teaching practice. Let us elaborate this circumstance further.

Taking its reference from the 'Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework'<sup>1</sup> the CTLM has effectively created a culture of continuous professional improvement for teachers by essentially enabling teacher collaboration and professional dialogue to occur and then

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.isq.qld.edu.au/australian-teacher-performance-and-development-framework>



targeting through them the professional learning content to specific areas of individual teacher need.

At Saint Augustine's Primary School, classroom walls have been removed to create large 'multi-use learning environments' (a number of classrooms re-engineered so as to accommodate a number of teachers and strategic groupings of students around ability and teaching requirements) and a 'teaching regime' developed such that opportunity exists for teachers to regularly meet and discuss--- known as 'professional learning team meetings'--- what's happening in their 'multi-use learning environment': chiefly in a context of each teacher's teaching. This is aided by a collaboratively developed classroom curriculum plan for each cohort (for example 100 Year 3 students and 4 teachers) that requires teachers to focus on each student as an individual learner, as a cohesive and strategic teaching team.

Interestingly this arrangement had the dual effect of enabling teachers to informally observe each other in (teaching) action and thus progressed to more formal observations as we outline in a later section. To get to this starting point, however the school's leadership team had to establish a culture of trust within 'teaching teams' and as such initial 'professional learning team meetings' were designed solely to enable teachers to get to know each other professionally, with open ended agendas. As times progressed 'professional learning team leaders' were asked to enact more focused conversation pieces--- meaning a framework for professional dialogue was introduced to guide teams in the process and to build on the informal observations through a process of structured coaching, mentoring and feedback. This process is known as *Teacher Learning Steps*' (TLS), and is discussed in more detail in a section which follows.

In the CTLM, the expectation has come to a point today that every teacher now undergoes twice termly, teaching observations through a strategy of using TLS. This process leads to follow-up feedback and professional dialogue sessions which are supported by plans for professional learning when required. TLS's are conducted by an assigned teacher coach/ mentor, who is usually the team's leader and is based on the Australian 'Teacher Performance and Development Framework' and the associated 'Professional Standards for Teachers'<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.qct.edu.au/PDF/PSU/OCT\\_AustProfStandards.pdf](http://www.qct.edu.au/PDF/PSU/OCT_AustProfStandards.pdf)



Bringing points thus far together, the CTLM's key aim is to gather a combination of student learning outcome and teacher performance data, which in turn is used to prompt and provoke professional dialogue about a teacher's teaching practice. The model relies on strategic opportunities for teachers to collaborate and engage in professional dialogue but also opportunities for teachers to view each other's teaching and thus engage in professional learning that involves, an inter-play of coaching, feedback and mentoring.

### **Teacher Learning Steps**

In Teacher Learning Steps process (TLS), teachers are able to reflect on their own practice and to challenge their own thinking in a non-threatening way. When participating in TLS teachers are able to examine how students respond to instruction, collect evidence of effective learning and revise their own practice based on this knowledge. The logic is that 'teachers as learners' will learn more from reflecting on their own practice using feedback than from just their engagement in the experiences. As Madden (2012) argues, all learners benefit from effective feedback and this is an essential part of the Teacher Learning Steps process.

### **What Does Teacher Learning Steps Look Like?**

In raw terms the TLS involves small groups of teachers, and with a designated team leader (known as the 'Lead Walker'), conducting a focussed visit (meaning there is a specific and negotiated intent)--- or what is known colloquially in the school as a 'walk'--- to a particular 'year level learning space' followed by feedback to and guided reflection with the (focal) teacher involved. The visit is considered 'collaborative time' for all the teachers involved, not just the 'focal' teacher and as such it is viewed as a time for all teachers involved to learn something new from the process. The emphasis is not so much about evaluating a teacher's performance but on deciding what needs to be improved, what needs to be celebrated and how such findings can be actioned for the effect of **all** teachers and **all** students. Consequently teachers take turns; to observe each other's instructional practice in action, to gather classroom data and to reflect upon the experience with the view of not only improving student learning, but also informing each teachers' teaching practice. The 'focus' for the visit is derived from prior teacher group discussions, where the school's overall development plan, current available data or trends, aspects of the Professional Teacher Standards or specific teacher development plans, are considered and planned for.





## The Elements of Teacher Learning Steps

The TLS has five elements that drive the process. We discuss each in turn. Before proceeding we need to point out that as the key aim of the TLS is to gather data, which in turn is used to prompt and provoke dialogue about instruction between teachers, the process begins with the end point in mind. That is, focusing the TLS process so that it enables improved teaching practice to take place. Thus the first element lays the foundation for the 'teacher learning step' process.

### *Element One: Pre walk discussion lead by the 'Lead Walker' (Professional Dialogue)*

Initially, a member of the school's leadership team takes on the role of 'Lead Walker'. It is important that the Lead Walker, at the implementation stage, is competent with the process of TLS and its various protocols and considerations as the enduring success of implementing TLS relies on their skills. The Lead Walker chiefly facilitates the 'pre walk and post walk discussions' as well as the feedback sessions to cohort teachers and the whole staff as applicable. The accompanying visiting teachers --- 'the walkers'---must be clear on the focus of the 'walk' (a visit and the enacting of the TLS process in a learning environment) and the evidence to be collected.

Key points that are discussed prior to a visit include:

- a. revisiting TLS protocols,
- b. the profile of the learning space to be visited and the reasons for the 'walk',
- c. establishing the focus for the visit.

### *Element Two: The Cohort Areas Walk (Learning Content in Context)*

The premise of the TLS process is enmeshed in a belief that a teacher's learning occurs best when they have a chance to visit other teachers' classrooms and to later engage in reciprocal processes of coaching, mentoring and feedback. This more intimate approach to professional learning attempts to open the eyes of participating teachers to what 'good teaching is', the need for ongoing improvement and for consistency in teaching standards. During the actual visit--- 'the walk'--- the visiting teachers, using a TLS proforma, are required to:

- a. Observe the layout of the learning space (i.e. the multi-use learning environment outlined earlier), the nature of the learning taking place and to listen to the interaction between teacher and students.
- b. In considering the focus of the Teacher Learning Steps, the visiting teachers take notes and asks questions like:
  1. Is the objective of the lesson clear to the students?
  2. What instructional strategy is the teacher using?
  3. Is this an appropriate strategy to use with the lesson?



4. What conditions present in classrooms enable students to improve their learning and achievement levels
- c. Conversation with students, when/if appropriate, enable the visiting teachers to delve more deeply into the learning and to understand the planning/programming undertaken by the cohort teachers. (eg “What are you learning? Why are you undertaking this task?)

***Element Three: Post Walk Discussions (Professional dialogue; Collaboration)***

The post walk stage provides opportunities for collaborative feedback and associated discussions: to establish a focus on what is working and what is not in terms of teaching and learning. It includes:

- a. Sharing information about what was observed in the learning space
- b. Self-reflection on how the observation informs one’s own teaching – noting implications for own practice/cohort organisation
- c. Formulation of ideas for improving teaching practice
- d. Identifying and naming a personal goal based on reflections and discussions
- e. Planning follow-up coaching and mentoring sessions as applicable.

***Element Four: Reflection and Feedback (Professional dialogue; Collaboration)***

Self-reflection and sharing experience/findings with colleagues is the underpinning concept for this element. Such discussions provide opportunity for teachers to share what they have learned. The focus for this element is on the connection to student learning and how instructional practice impacts learning and thus how it can be improved. This element has three parts.

1. Teacher Observer’s Self Reflection. From this point in the TLS process the focus shifts to *specific action that each teacher will embark on* as a result of the ‘learning walk’ activity. Discussion on how one measures their professional learning is central to the process. For TLS to make a difference, it must be focused on bridging the nexus between teacher learning and classroom practice. This includes:
  - i. Visiting teachers reflecting on their own personal teaching practice and how they interact with their own cohort during the teaching session and discuss implications for their (and each other’s) own teaching.
  - ii. Discussion leads to teachers creating their own personal goals to work on leading up to the next TLS. This collaboration promotes teacher accountability for performance.
2. The second part of this element focuses on the teachers being observed. Teachers need relevant, real-time data on their instruction and the feedback provided by the lead walker to the learning space teachers is specific to observed behaviours, focused, and descriptive of the teacher performance observed (that is guided by professional teacher standards). The features of this section of the model include:



- i. Feedback is provided to the teachers being observed and is based on the evidence discussed at “Post Walk Discussion” from the Lead Walker after school on the day of the Teacher Learning Steps.
- ii. Observed teachers are able to debrief on the experience and share insight/explanations of teaching practices used.
- iii. Further cohort goals are discussed as part of the reflection process.

3. Whole Staff Feedback. As the TLS involves each cohort of teachers undertaking two TLS per term, the lead walkers meet at the end of the designated week to share insight from leading the TLS. Consequent discussion allows for a whole of staff feedback on the collation of the seven Teacher Learning Steps at the next staff meeting following the TLS week. This is important so as to:

- i. Enable sharing of teaching practice across the whole school,
- ii. To allow teachers to situate their own learning within the context of the whole school.
- iii. Create a whole school plan for sustaining/improving performance

***Element Five : Improvement through Coaching, Mentoring and More Feedback***

The final element in the TLS process returns teachers to the central premise of the Collaborative Teacher Learning Model (CTLM) by involving them in an inter-related and coordinated series of coaching, mentoring and feedback activities. These activities are embedded in the earlier principles of ‘professional dialogue’, ‘collaboration’ and ‘learning to teach in context’ and use the ‘trail’ laid by the TLS as the enabler for teachers to learn and continuously improve.

Anecdotal results from the CTLM indicate (as collated from the post walk discussions, PMIs with staff and leadership team meetings):

- Teachers are sharing best practices;
- An increased awareness by the leadership team of what is happening in the learning spaces;
- An increase in teacher time on task;
- A more informed teacher understanding of curriculum gaps and inconsistencies;
- A more targeted teacher understanding of individual teacher professional learning needs;
- An improvement in the standard/quality of student work;
- An improved quality of conversations about teaching practice and instruction; and
- The beginnings of a common language around pedagogy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Based on the St Augustine’s Primary School five yearly review: “School Review and Development” in 2013.



## Conclusion

A key advantage of this professional learning experience is that it occurs within the school 'work' environment. It is grounded in day-to day teaching practice and occurs regularly. It is not only aligned with the learning philosophy of the school but more importantly, engages staff in a targeted and personalised professional dialogue and follow-up coaching and mentoring around improving each teacher's teaching.

For improved teaching practice to occur, the CTLM argues teachers need to analyse and reflect on how students learn best and make corresponding changes to improve their teaching practice. Because the Teacher Learning Steps takes place in teaching teams across the school, a collective responsibility for improved student outcomes promotes a more comprehensive focus on learning. It also holds, in a positive way, staff members accountable for their own personal teaching, but provides them with constructive and supportive means through which to improve. The Teacher Learning Steps is, in effect, an opportunity for teachers to collaborate with and learn from each other in a meaningful and relevant way. Throughout each stage of the Teacher Learning Steps model there is a purposeful sharing of instructional practice and adoption of pedagogical practices that improve student learning.

Early anecdotal data suggests the CTLM and its associated Teacher Learning Steps is creating a school wide picture of learning that enables teachers to improve their teaching practice.

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