



Churchie.

The Professional Learning Community in an Academic School: Theory into Practice

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Abstract: The development of a school's professional learning community (PLC) enhances the professional status of participating teachers and administrators and the levels of student learning and academic achievement. This presentation outlines initiatives at an academic, independent P-12 boys' school in Australia to promote continuous improvement and innovation amongst staff and students via a robust PLC.

Key Questions:

1. How can small group commitment to the processes of critical thinking and pedagogy be shared with, adopted and critically reviewed by the wider staff?
2. What is the relationship between staff participation in a PLC and the conduct, framing and review of professional development, such as: teacher appraisal and feedback; teacher mentoring and classroom observation and feedback?
3. How can the relationship between the conduct of a PLC and levels of academic achievement be determined and evaluated and shape pedagogy?

‘Manage the macro rather than mourn the micro’

Wes Moore (IBSC, Baltimore 25 June, 2017)



Media Headlines/Concerns: Schooling in Australia

‘Poor score: Australia is slipping down the world education league’ – *The Courier Mail*, 11 December, 2016.

‘OECD education rankings show Australia slipping – Asian countries in the lead’ – *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 May, 2016.

‘Teachers’ flaws stifle students’ – *The Australian*, 18 April, 2017.

‘Educating Australia: Why our schools aren’t improving’ – *The Conversation*, 2 February, 2017

‘Australia’s primary challenge: How to lift teacher quality in early school years’ – *Learning First*, April 2017

‘Australian schools are in ‘absolute decline globally’ says PISA report’ – *ABC News*, 6 December, 2016.

‘Schools stuck in industrial era: report’ – *Preparing Young People for the Future of Work* cited in *The Australian Financial Review*, 27 March, 2017.



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MAKING OF MEN



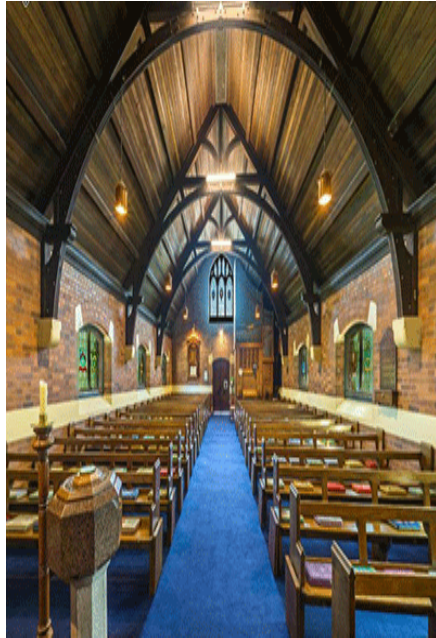
- Inner Brisbane, Qld
- Est. 1912
- 1800 boys
- 530 Prep
- 170 Boarders
- 1250 Senior School
- Four Tenets
 - Scholastic Attainment
 - Spiritual Awareness
 - Personal Growth
 - Community Service



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The Anglican Church Grammar School (Churchie)

Source: School Prospectus – www.churchie.com.au



P-12 Independent boys' school
Brisbane, Australia
Young men of good character, strong
intellect & generous spirit

Preparatory School (Reception-Yr. 6) = 530
students
Senior School (Yrs. 7-12) = 1250 students

Academic focus –
majority of students direct themselves
towards university, but vocational
pathways are available

Extensive range of co-curricular and
sporting activities on offer
Focus on leadership development

Staff Academic Initiatives/Engagements 2016+

- Staff 'Professional Action Group' (PAG): history, development, agenda(s), contributions and challenges
- Development of 'Cultures of Thinking' through school-based In-Service(s), attendance at conferences and familiarisation school-based initiatives facilitated by Project Zero (Harvard University)
- Staff training for impending school—based curricular initiatives (International Baccalaureate (IB), 2018) and State-wide policy initiatives (Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE), 2019)
- Partnership with universities (University of Melbourne, University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology) re: school-based learning
- Scheduled faculty time for reflection and planning
- Support for staff pursuing professional development

Churchie Co-curricular Landscape

- Fifteen (15) sports plus a dozen activities (Music, Drama, Stage Crew ...)
- 2.6 activities per student years 7-12
- Circa. 400 coaches involves throughout the year; over 300 external coaches
- Extensive community involvement



Co-curricular Programme Links

- Emotional intelligence testing – links Swinburne University
- Library tuition
- Annual review
- Professional development
- Staff involvement(s) (relationships)
- Data correlation – academic engagement/performance and co-curricular involvement
- Terminology – ‘co-curricular’ rather than ‘extra-curricular’



Preparatory School Links

- Maths – Year 7 – 9
- English – Year 7 – 9
- Staff Well Being
- ELearning Committee
- Innovation Committee



Finding a balance?



Whole School Reflection and Inquiry-based Teacher Learning

Insights and Benchmarks

‘Structural change deals with policies, programmes, rules and procedure ... cultural change requires altering long-held assumptions, beliefs, expectations and habits that represent the norm for people in the organization. ... culture is ‘just the way we do things around here’ (DuFour & Fullan, 2013, p. 52).

‘ ... to win the AFL premiership because:

- We had a clear plan
- We didn’t waiver when the outcome was not what we would have preferred
- We kept working at our plan harder and held each other accountable to it
- We trusted each other and leant on each other
- Success followed because we stuck to the process’ (Roos, 2017, p. 26).



Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

What are PLCs?

'There are six (6) characteristics of high-performing PLCs ...

1. Share mission (purpose), vision (clear direction), values (collective commitments) and goals (indicators, timelines and targets) which are all focused on student learning.
2. A collaborative culture with a focus on learning ...
3. Collective inquiry into best practice and current reality
4. Action orientation to 'learning by doing'
5. A commitment to continuous improvement
6. A results orientation (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2010).

Underlying these six (6) qualities are three (3) big ideas or assumptions that serve as the core of the PLC process:

1. A relentless focus on learning for all students
2. A collaborative culture and collective effort to support student and adult learning
3. A results orientation to improve practice and drive continuous improvement (DuFour & Fullan, 2013, p. 8).'

Why Professional Learning Communities?

‘ .. higher levels of social support for student achievement and higher levels of authentic pedagogy ... teachers reported higher levels of morale and improved teaching practice’ (Lee et al., 2015, p. 12)

‘ ... culture is not something that you ‘fix’ cultural change is what you get after you’ve put new processes or structures in place to tackle tough business challenges like re-working an outdated strategy or business model. The culture evolves as you do that important work. ... Reworking fundamental practices will inevitably lead to some new values and behaviours ... culture isn’t a final destination’ (Lorsch & McTague, 2016, p. 98).

‘Wide-scale improvement in Australian schools depends on promoting evidence-based teaching practices in all schools’ (Masters, 2016, p. 39).

‘Substantial and continuous improvement of schools, like other organizations, requires a context that is conducive to change – one that supports both individuals and the organization as a whole’ (DuFour & Eaker, 2003, p. 75)

‘Teachers have never been in a better position than now to take charge of their own professional growth. ... teacher education no longer needs to be contained within a finite pre-service programme’ (Lee et al., 2015, p. 65)

Professional Learning Communities - Characteristics

- Reflective dialogue to enhance professional learning
- Mentoring networks
- Establishing a research agenda for teacher- led professionalism
- Systemness – ‘the degree to which people identify and are committed to an entity larger than themselves’ (DuFour & Fullan, 2013, p. 18)
- Commitment to continuous learning through shared personal practice; supportive and shared leadership; shared values and vision; collective learning and application (Hord, 1997)
- Mutual trust, respect, support; inclusive membership; openness, networks and partnerships (Lee et al., 2015 pp. 9-10).



Professional Learning Communities - Obstacles

Obstacles identified in Singapore:

- 'Heavy teacher workloads
- Ambiguity re: the nature of PLC processes and their efficacy
- Bureaucratic and red tape hindering teacher professionalism
- Context of barriers ... school leadership styles and overly centrist implementation of PLCs' (Lee et al., 2015, p. 12)

Further Obstacles:

- ' .. Imposed simplistically and heavy-handedly by over-zealous administrators' (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 128)
- 'It never ends; it requires significant changes to traditional schooling practices that have evolved over a century; it is certain to create conflict; it is multi-faceted; it is a heuristic process of trial and error' (DuFour and Fullan, 2013, p. 53)
- 'Teachers suffer – the law of initiative fatigue (Reeves, 2010)' (DuFour & Fullan, 2013, p. 63)
- 'Structural change that is not supported by cultural change will eventually be overwhelmed by the culture, or it is in the culture that any organization finds meaning and stability' (Schlechty, 1997, p. 136).

Professional Learning Communities: Implementation Stages

Three Phases of Change (Fullan, 1990):

1. Initiation

‘Connect a change initiative to student needs, based on the school’s values and norms ... a strong leader advocates a shared vision and staff begin to dialogue and share information, seek new knowledge and commit to the effort to achieve their goals’ (cited in Hoffman and Hipp, (Eds.), 2003, p. 154)

2. Implementation

‘Principal encourages staff to set high expectations and enables them to meet their goals by sharing power, authority and responsibility’ (2003, p. 154)

‘**Implementation dip**’ – series of unplanned setbacks that hinder progress

3. Institutionalisation

‘Change initiative becomes embedded into the culture of the school’ (2003, p. 154)

Conclusion

This workshop reflects some preliminary work undertaken by a group of Churchie teachers regarding the framing of learning amongst and between staff and students at the school through reference to the processes of a professional learning community. As such this work constitutes a 'pre-initiation' phase of change.

The workshop activities are, however, relevant to the Initiation phase of change at the school should they be implemented. The processes of professional development, staff appraisal and communication amongst and between staff are important sources of reflective dialogue and directly related to staff and student learning.



Activities: See/Look/Wonder - Engage with 'Platformitis'

'Platformitis' – 'the fixation of retaining existing configurations ... the continued reliance on the cherished platforms of each service' (Luttwak, 2016, p. 39)

Example: 'The US air force recently allocated \$21.4 b. of its RDT&E funds ... to developing a manned bomber. Unsurprisingly, Northrop won the contract to replace the Northrop B-2 flying-wing stealth bomber designed in the 1970s ... with yet another manned stealth-wing design, as if all the intervening innovations starting with unmanned aircraft had never happened, and as if stealth-defeating radar techniques didn't exist' (p. 39).



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