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*In memory of Richard Jones
1967–2015*

Editors

Special Issue: *Stopping for a moment: The influence of change on teachers' professional practice*

Jenny Ferrier-Kerr and Kerry Earl

With afterword by Susan Groundwater-Smith

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About the Journal

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Teachers and Curriculum welcomes

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- provides examples of innovative curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practice; and
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Acknowledgement of Reviewers

The Editors would like to acknowledge the contribution of the reviewers.

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RUNNING A MARATHON: ONE TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE OF IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

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Miriam is a graduate of Christchurch and Wellington Colleges of Education, where she undertook her initial teacher education in the early 90s before beginning teaching in the Hutt Valley. Her husband's job has taken the family from Christchurch, to Leeds (UK) and now to Brisbane. During this time, Miriam has continued to teach: full time, short contracts, job share and relief teaching depending on her family situation. Currently she has a job share position teaching Year 3 students as well as a role in Literacy and Numeracy Support.

Professional Summary

In this paper, the author reflects on her experience of implementing change in a primary school setting. She discusses the ways in which she learned to deal constructively with resistance to change by first building positive, professional relationships that were defined by trust. She points out that guiding teachers in critical reflection of their own practice is challenging but that when they are engaged in honest and open reflective practice, they begin to implement evidence-based practice in their classroom.

Introduction

At the start of one school year, I seemed to literally 'stumble' into a new job. The position involved working as part of a targeted teaching team that was to implement changes to literacy and numeracy programmes from Year 0 to Year 2 (15 classes in all) in a large, high achieving, city primary school. Primarily, the task of the targeted teaching team, myself and one other teacher, was to help teachers develop and understand pedagogy in the areas of literacy and numeracy in order to improve student achievement. A further aspect of the role involved encouraging the existing school-based learning communities to be safe places for professional dialogue with colleagues. Hence, we began the process of leading teachers in critical reflection and inquiry into their practice. Inevitably, despite many successes there were frustrations.

The timeliness of a university paper I was enrolled in could not therefore have been better, especially as in this class we began by examining the models of restricted and extended professionalism (Hoyle, 1974). This, it seemed to me was vital to understanding where teachers were situated in terms of their professionalism—described by Hoyle (1974) as being the professional skills and knowledge that teachers have, and use, to benefit students' learning. The extended professional typically values collaboration and operates collegially, giving and accepting feedback on practice. They invest time and effort in their own continued professional learning and become involved in the wider school context having a wider vision of professional teaching and learning. In contrast, restricted professionals value autonomy, control and independence in the classroom. Their practice is built on intuition, experience and classroom-based perceptions rather than rationality and theory. The university course also critically examined teacher ethics, which at its core demands continued improvement of teaching practice. Aligned with these topics was research about professional learning and development. Importantly, we explored how these three, research, professional learning and development, are most effective when "embedded in the life and work of the school" (Little, 1993 as cited in Hargreaves, 2000, p. 165).

In this paper, I reflect on my experience of being involved in implementing change. First, I needed to learn to deal constructively with the resistance some teachers showed to the school wide agenda of improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy that required changes to existing practice. I found that building and sustaining positive, professional relationships with the teachers was important. Second, to ensure that the learning communities within the school operated in a collegial manner, relationships within them had to be defined first and foremost by trust. Third, guiding teachers in critical reflection of their own practice proved more challenging than anticipated. While many teachers engaged in honest and open reflection and began to implement evidence-based practice

in their classroom, others appeared to choose not to, or were unable to engage with the reflective process.

Background

The students in our school come from diverse cultural, socio-economic and family backgrounds. This means that our students bring with them a range of experiences, capabilities, values, and interests. As such, pedagogy that previously served teachers and students well now required our careful attention, and for teachers to be open to, and ready for change. I was well aware that teachers are influenced by what goes on in their own lives and their beliefs and values, therefore their priorities and lives must be a consideration in any change process. Furthermore, as Stoll (1999) points out, each teacher experiences their own “career pattern and that influences their desire and readiness to engage in improvement activities” (para. 1).

During my interview for the job, the Deputy Principal (DP) advised my team-mate and I that to effect change we should understand that this task we were undertaking would be like running a marathon, rather than a sprint race. In other words, this was to be a long-term project. It was clear to us as Groundwater-Smith, Ewing, and Le Cornu (2011) state that we would “need to eschew the easy fix, which attends only to the immediate...” (p. 18). Teaching is demanding and it can be difficult for teachers to find the time and energy amidst the busyness of classroom life to incorporate new pedagogy.

Interestingly, a short time later I found myself reading the words of Ben-Peretz, Kleeman, Reichenberg, and Shimoni (2010, as cited in Smardon & Charteris, 2012). These authors point out that it is “difficult, almost impossible, to teach a teacher how to teach, the only way to promote professional development is through self-discovery of one’s professional identity” (p. 125). For me, there was both comfort and challenge in these words. The comfort lay in the validation that teachers can be difficult to work with in the context of new learning and change, and assimilating innovative pedagogy. The challenge lay in the prospect of guiding 15 Year 0 to Year two teachers, many older and more experienced in the classroom than I, to engage in critical reflection on their own practice with an emphasis on rediscovering their professional identity.

To effectively cope with change teachers need to draw on their varied skill-sets and have an understanding of the change process itself. Groundwater-Smith et al. (2011) point out that “today’s teachers need not only to be resourceful, adaptable and knowledgeable, they also have to be activist professionals, capable of being discerning, imaginative problem solvers able to deal with relentless social, economic and technological change” (p. 3). But what happens when teachers are not prepared to change or adapt their pedagogy to adopt evidence-based practices? When they are not able to function in positive and mature ways as members of a learning community? Or when they appear to have little intention of, or limited ability to engage in critical reflection of their practice?

Response to change

The general lack of engagement I observed some teachers initially had with the process to improve literacy and numeracy pedagogy was acted out in different ways. There was active resistance. Each week I would arrive in one classroom at an allocated time and was given a prepared task to work through with a set group of students outside the classroom. Although working with a small group of students had merit and considerable advantage for the students, it was a long way from the brief the teachers were given to allow the targeted teaching team to model and co-teach strategies in the classroom for the explicit teaching of reading. For instance, a teacher had invited me into the classroom where I modelled a specific reading strategy. While met with enthusiasm and positive remarks by the teacher, I knew that this teacher had not subsequently tried the strategy nor had they made any change in their practice to accommodate and include current evidence-based thinking. In addition apathy was evident among a number of teachers. In time, I came to understand that some of these teachers were suffering from what Eisner (2002) calls “secondary ignorance” (p. 578). He describes this as being when an individual doesn’t know something but they are unaware they don’t know it. The good news is that this can be resolved with the help of others, who are able to point out aspects of behaviour that an individual may not be aware of. The challenge for me was to continue to

build the positive, professional relationships referred to earlier with those teachers, so that conversations including the difficult ones could take place.

I realized too, how important it was to acknowledge that change is an ongoing and demanding process for teachers. Reading Guskey's (1986) words helped me to understand that "change brings anxiety and can be very threatening" (p. 9). Hence, it was essential that teachers felt my role was to help them succeed, not be put on the spot to fail.

Learning communities

The learning communities operating in the school were made up of year level groupings. The groups met weekly for an hour and included discussion on a professional development focus such as the behaviour of individual children, how to differentiate the curriculum for learners with particular needs, and housekeeping matters. One learning community was characterised by an undercurrent of mistrust, competition (as opposed to co-operation) and one-upmanship. As long as this unprofessional behaviour existed and continued in the group, it was difficult and challenging for the less experienced teachers to fully engage in rich professional dialogue, and learn from their colleagues. In order to stimulate deep, professional conversation, an environment underpinned by trust needed to be created so that teachers felt secure in reviewing and reflecting on their teaching practice and engaging in both offering and accepting feedback notes (Grey, 2011). It was vital for this group to begin to function in a healthy manner for their learning community to commit to building relationships, sharing knowledge and helping each other solve problems.

Wenger (2000) discusses the concept of mutuality as being vital to the effectiveness of learning communities. He asserts that group members must "know each other well enough to interact productively" and "they must trust each other, not just personally, but also in their ability to contribute to the enterprise of the community" (p. 230). My main task within the group was to advocate for the less experienced teachers; guide discussion towards problem solving; and build strong relationships with the teachers who wanted to operate in a collegial manner with professional dialogue as a core strategy. As Grey (2011) states, "regular engagement in professional dialogue can create a culture of reflection and professional learning within a team" (p. 24). This highlighted for me what powerful tools for change dialogue, reflection and learning can be.

The most challenging aspect of my role was to guide teachers to critically reflect on their practice. For a few teachers across the year levels this seemed to come naturally. It was evident that years of teaching experience are no indicator of the ability to reflect critically. One young graduate teacher, despite struggling in several areas of her classroom practice was eager to engage in critical reflection and actively sought to improve her pedagogy. She won the respect of the leadership team with her determination and ability to implement improved teaching strategies and reflect on her current practice. Interestingly, she was on the receiving end of some highly unprofessional behaviour from more senior teaching colleagues who it can only be assumed felt threatened by the graduate's willingness to engage with 'a new way of doing things'. This brought home to me Larrivee's (2000) claim that "to be critically reflective" one must "act with integrity, openness, and commitment rather than compromise, defensiveness, or fear" (p. 295). Hence, I needed to critically reflect on this situation and consider how best to approach it. My teammate and I had been involved in rich, professional dialogue to find a solution to this dilemma. Despite the small size of our own learning community (myself, my teammate, the Head of Curriculum and to a lesser extent, the Deputy Principal), it felt like a powerhouse of ideas, knowledge and mutual support. It was as if the sum had become greater than the parts. Being able to model professional dialogue could have an ongoing influence if our teachers could 'see' this.

In moving forward, we need to continue to model critical reflection and engage teachers in professional discussion with an expectation of their mature, professional and positive involvement. As Robinson (2003) suggests, "teachers who are skilled inquirers can become catalysts for an evidence-based teacher learning culture" (p. 2). I believe a change in culture has occurred and will continue to over time as teachers come to see and experience the benefits of critical reflection and eventually, an improvement in classroom data as evidence-based pedagogy becomes embedded in practice.

There were a number of challenges as I worked as part of a team to implement change in teachers' literacy and numeracy pedagogy. It was important to accept and know that patience, determination and

consistency were vital because achieving lasting change needed to be a long-term effort. Building positive and professional relationships based on trust and mutual respect became critical to allow honest feedback to be given and received. Seeking to change the culture of one somewhat fractured learning community has and will continue to require strong interpersonal and leadership skills. Supporting experienced teachers and those less experienced to engage in professional collegial dialogue has proven essential to their ongoing professional development and learning, as has maintaining strong, ethical boundaries for behaviour within the group with appropriate practice modelled when the opportunity arises. It is important for me to continue to engage in critical reflection around my own pedagogy and develop my leadership skills, especially ‘people skills’. Undertaking this reflection has ensured that I too am able to give and receive feedback, thereby improving my own practice. Thus I am able to say that “compared to last year, I am different” (Smith, 2002, p. 34).

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