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Teacher Professional Learning: Learning to WALK and the NSW Quality Teaching Framework.

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Abstract: This paper reports on a research case study, conducted in a school in Western Sydney, Australia, in which teachers worked with researchers and students to create learning experiences that reflected both intellectual quality and significance – two dimensions of the NSW Quality Teaching Framework (QTF). Findings suggest that these dimensions of the QTF were not implemented in a balanced way and this reflected a lack of support for the professional learning of teachers which the researchers could have helped to address, but did not. The paper argues that teachers should be supported by ongoing professional learning in order to sustain innovation and change.

Introduction

Learning to WALK is an approach which combines ***W****ork*, ***A****ction*, ***L****ife* and academic ***K****nowledge* in a way that is relevant and meaningful to the student. This paper considers a number of factors that emerged as a result of conducting the *Learning to WALK* project. It focuses on balancing the three elements of the Quality Teaching Framework (QTF) and seeks to explore how teachers can be more effectively supported in their professional learning. Although it aimed to facilitate the negotiation of learning between teachers and students, actively involved both in a process of talking and collaborating, the study revealed an imbalance in the simultaneous implementation of Intellectual Quality and Significance. *Learning to WALK* was driven by the Quality Teaching Framework (QTF) developed in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, for the planning and assessment of quality teaching practice and subsequent learning outcomes. The research study focused on *Significance,* one of three key dimensions of the QTF which promotes relevant and connected learning, and it highlighted difficulties in the application of the three QTF dimensions – *Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment,* and *Significance*. Although not the purpose of the study, Teacher Professional Learning, particularly more collaborative approaches, emerged as a vital factor in the overall process of negotiating quality student learning. It follows, therefore, that these issues are not only applicable to all teachers, but they should also be embedded in Teacher Education programs.

The Scope of the Paper

The NSW Quality Teaching Framework

Keeping young people engaged in learning at school, addressing increasing disengagement, and enhancing their learning outcomes has been a long standing concern amongst educators (Fredricks, McColskey, Meli, Mordica, Montrosse, & Mooney, 2011; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty, 2011; Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Department of

Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009; Manefield, Collins, Moore, Mahar & Warne, 2007; Costante, 2011).

Carrington (2006) describes the 'signature practices' of middle schooling which are characterised by connecting learning at school with the everyday lives and concerns of students; negotiating the curriculum with students; and providing learning experiences which are both intellectually challenging and relevant. These concepts are consistent with the underlying premises of the Learning to WALK project in that it seeks to create learning experiences (or work plans) that reflect Intellectual Quality and Significance, as described by the NSW Quality Teaching Framework (NSW Department of Education and Training [DET], 2003). It is also consistent with 'authentic pedagogies' as described by Newman and Associates (1996), Queensland's four-dimensional 'productive pedagogies' (Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard, 2006).

The NSW Quality Teaching Framework (QTF) aims to increase student interest, motivation and engagement in learning without compromising intellectual quality, thus leading to improved learning outcomes. Students engage in work that is characterised by *Significance* (relevance) and *Intellectual Quality* within a supportive *Quality Learning Environment* (Killen, 2007; Ladwig & King, 2003). All three dimensions are described by a number of distinct but connected elements, which should be implemented together, rather than in isolation, across all Key Learning Areas (KLA) from Kindergarten to Year 12 (NSW DET, 2003; Killen, 2007).

Recent reporting on the implementation of the QTF in NSW schools indicates that the balancing of the three elements of the QTF has not been managed well (Amosa, Ladwig, Griffiths, & Gore, 2007; Williams & Wilson, 2010). Although 'productive pedagogies' and QTF approaches have the capacity to improve the academic achievement of *all*, particularly Indigenous students and students from low SES backgrounds (Amosa, Ladwig, Griffiths, & Gore, 2007; Hayes et al., 2006), recent studies have shown this is rarely accomplished in practice. It would appear that high levels of both *Intellectual Quality* and *Significance* rarely feature together in classroom teaching (Comber & Nixon, 2009; Amosa, Ladwig, Griffiths & Gore, 2007; Hattam, Brennan, Zipin & Comber, 2009; Ladwig, 2009; Ladwig, Smith, Gore, Amosa, & Griffiths, 2007; Sellar, 2009; Stephenson, Bo, Chavez, Fayle & Gavel. Killen (2007) suggests that teachers do not sufficiently understand the terminology of the framework and therefore do not properly implement the QTF in the classroom.

Teacher Professional Learning

The following research study, reporting on the implementation of the *Learning to WALK* strategy, discovered that *Intellectual Quality* and *Significance* acted out as separate concepts that were or were not applied depending on the nature of the task. This paper seeks to explore this tension in the context of implementing the *Quality Teaching Framework (QTF)* in a way that understands and acknowledges each of the three dimensions – *Intellectual Quality, Significance* and *Quality Learning Environment*. It became apparent that although the QTF is a "very useful way of examining and guiding teaching by suggesting quite specific things that teachers should do to enhance student learning" (Killen, 2007, p.30), current forms of professional learning and curriculum support do not enable nor equip teachers to manage the complexities associated with applying the dimensions in the classroom.

The discussion raises questions surrounding the nature of existing professional development and seeks to explore the need for professional learning which empowers teachers to improve their practice within the context of a supportive school environment and culture of quality teaching. Whilst understanding teacher professional learning (TPL) was not an explicit purpose of the project, some TPL was conducted with the three participating teachers to orient them to the WALK approach. Experiences and observations throughout this study caused the researchers to reflect upon the importance of teacher professional learning for the sustainability of innovation and change around the QTF.

This Study

The purpose of this study was to understand whether the *Learning to WALK* approach to constructing learning experiences, and particularly the process of learning negotiation with students that is embedded within *WALK*, would enhance dimensions of the Quality Teaching Framework in the case study site. The researchers were also interested in whether the introduction of the *WALK* process would impact positively upon learning in each of the classrooms and enhance student learning engagement.

Learning to WALK draws on other work by Wilson (Wilson, 1998, 2000, 2002; Wilson & Sproats, 2009) and essentially involves students and teachers working collaboratively to plan a unit of work in which they make connections between ***W****ork*, ***A****ction* (social and civic participation and critique), ***L****ife* (family, relationships, personal futures) and academic ***K****nowledge* (describing the often decontextualized and theoretical forms of knowledge represented in the current formal school curriculum). In this study, *Significance* was perceived in terms of student views about their own learning needs and the capacity of teachers to work with these student perceptions to determine that which is relevant or significant. To address this, the ***A****ction* (citizenship) component of the *WALK* acronym involves a process of discussing and negotiating the curriculum with students in the classroom.

Methodology

The project was conducted in a single site, comprehensive Year 7-10 secondary school in the western suburbs of Sydney. Western Sydney has a vast number of people and families considered to be of low socio-economic status and it also has a high Indigenous population. These groups, traditionally, have presented schools and educators with the challenge of making school relevant and engaging children in learning, and retaining them throughout high school (Fredricks, McColskey, Meli, Mordica, Montrosse, & Mooney, 2011; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty, 2011; Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009; Manefield, Collins, Moore, Mahar & Warne, 2007; Costante, 2011). The school in this study has a mix of students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, but could be characterised as servicing a majority of low SES families. The study occurred between week five in Term 1 of the school year, and the final week, week ten, of Term 2 – a total of 15 weeks engagement in the school. In consultation with the school principal, three teachers volunteered one of their classes to participate – a Year 8 mathematics class (the most advanced, streamed maths class), a Year 10 English class, and a Year 10 elective Dance class.

In the five remaining weeks in Term 1 the researchers met with each of the teachers with their classes to explain the WALK approach. A single, formal two hour TPL session was conducted with the teachers, over viewing the nature of the QTF and the development of the WALK model as a tool in its service. Once the teachers had each identified a topic of study, researchers worked individually with each teacher, focusing on the process of negotiating content, incorporating the QTF dimensions and learning activities with their classes, and developing a subsequent work plan for their classes which built in some of their students' ideas and provides them with choice and flexibility in selecting learning activities. The teachers conducted the 'brainstorming' sessions with their students on the proposed topics in weeks seven and eight of Term 1. In the first four weeks of Term 2, the teachers presented the work plans to their classes and implemented the units of work.

The researchers used a range of methodologies to collect data during this process. Using a classroom climate survey instrument, the Challenge Checklist (adapted from Baird (1994); also Wilson (1999), (2000); also see end of this paper), a pre-survey of each class was conducted to obtain student perceptions of the classroom and learning environment. Each class was observed prior to the introduction of the *WALK* unit and each teacher, and small groups of students from each class, were interviewed. During the teaching of the negotiated units, the researchers observed numerous learning sessions in each class, the majority of which were videoed and transcribed. Following the completion of each unit, a second, post Challenge Checklist survey was issued, and a further round of interviews were conducted with each of the teachers, their head teachers, principal and deputy principal, and with student focus groups from each class.

Broad Findings

In the pre-trial data, obtained from an initial administering of the Challenge Checklist, there was a generally positive expectation amongst teachers and students that participation in the project would at increase the teachers' repertoire of pedagogical strategies. However, the teachers expressed some reservations or concerns about the project, ranging from the kinds of minor anxieties that normally accompany trying something new and uncertainty about how some students may respond to the process and to different pedagogical strategies, to more serious concerns about its potentially negative impact on students' learning:

> We are very prescriptive here in the Maths department and in other areas. Each lesson is planned. We have already unpacked the concepts, lesson by lesson. The kids don't have the concepts or the language relating to the concepts. I think that's the concern I have with their capacity to help develop a unit of work like in WALK (Maths teacher).
>
> See, I've never done this. I've never actually negotiated the activities with the kids. I've always made that decision, what we're going to do. I've let them negotiate to a certain extent. Maybe timeframes or elements of the final project, but have never given over to the kids that power to negotiate activities. So I'm finding it a little bit… interesting, a bit scary, but exciting at the same time. I think it will be a really good thing for the kids to do, to think about ways that they learn, and what's best for them (Dance teacher).

The students interviewed prior to the trial had positive expectations of the *Learning to WALK* strategy and thought these particular teachers would be more amenable to this approach than some others. Apart from offering a welcome break from routine, writing from dictation, or copying from overheads or textbooks, students overwhelmingly anticipated diversity in their learning. As one Year 8 boy said, "everyone learns differently". These students were looking forward to being given the opportunity to nominate and choose activities that suited their different learning styles:

> If we're learning how we want, then we're going to listen. But if we're sitting down writing the whole time, then we're not going to. But if we get to say how we learn, then obviously we're going to listen because that's how we want to learn (Student 1).
>
> I'm hoping that if it does happen it will convince teachers that this is the way we need to learn, so maybe at the end of next term they'll do the same thing. End of Term 3, they'll try it again, and if that works, like, they'll do the whole thing again. Like, it doesn't have to be a research program (Student 2).

Following the trial, several teachers felt the experience did not have much of an impact on the students, but this perception, to some extent, was at odds with what was being said in the second round of student focus groups and Challenge Checklist surveys. While the students almost universally had a positive response to the experience, and felt that their expectations had been fulfilled, the teachers' responses were more qualified. At the least, all the teachers felt they had learned new strategies to add to their teaching repertoire.

> I like the idea of giving kids the opportunity to say what they wanted to say. I think the ideas they came up with were really limited by their experiences … But they're kids, they're meant to be. I liked getting their ideas, but at the same time, everything they said, or everything that they went through, I

> basically did already … I loved getting their ideas and it was really easy to put up. Implementing them, on the other hand, wasn't so easy (Maths teacher).
> [I will persevere with] group work. I was surprised at them actually getting on and doing it. Especially in a class full of girls! I thought for sure they'd sit around and talk, but they got on with it. So I'd definitely be putting on more group work activities, because they enjoyed it as well (Dance teacher).
> English Teacher: I think even the most regulated, the most controlling teachers, could still find a way through with the Work Plan, where the students do a lot of self-choice activities. Researcher: Do you think it would be useful for them to do that? English Teacher: I think so … I think sometimes it can almost be stifling on a student's education to say, 'This is the only way to do things'.

Participating teachers embraced their role in this project with enthusiasm and professionalism but the findings suggest that they had difficulty reconciling and balancing *Significance* (relevance) and *Intellectual Quality,* particularly when the activities were student-generated. In these instances, *Significance* was clearly represented but level of challenge and *Intellectual Quality* declined significantly. The third QTF dimension, *Quality Learning Environment,* was not referred to by the teachers, which is consistent with other research and highlights that the NSW QTF dimensions continue to be considered separately rather than as an integrally related whole.

The students' expectations of participating in the project were generally fulfilled. Apart from (but not precluding) those students who were quite happy with the way the subject was already taught, the students responded very positively to the *Learning to WALK* strategy. The results of the second Challenge Checklist student survey confirmed these impressions. The scores and 'happiness index' relating to 'interesting' and 'different and unusual' topics and work; 'enjoyment'; opportunities for 'practical activities'; 'decision making', and 'understanding' of the work, increased to across each of the classes. Students responded most strongly to having the choice of different options for learning activities, and the strongest of these responses came from students in the class that offered the most choices. One Year 10 girl told researchers: "I just really enjoyed this unit of work. That's just my opinion. I thought it was awesome. We should do it every day, in every class. Even in Maths." Another commented:

> I thought it was good, because it let the teacher know what we wanted to learn and how we wanted to learn it. So it meant that the teacher was actually going to let us learn what we wanted to learn, and how we wanted to learn it, instead of saying 'Here's the worksheets' or 'Here's the overhead' and do it that way. It's much better that way, where you can express your ideas (Student 3).

Findings on Intellectual Challenge

Other findings included the perception amongst both students and teachers, as expressed in the Challenge Checklist item on the 'difficulty of the work', that in the negotiated units where some activities were based on student ideas, the learning designed around student ideas tended to be easier and less intellectually challenging (this tendency to lower expectations in relation to intellectual challenge in the context of student-generated ideas has also been investigated in Williams and Wilson, in press). Responses from teachers' summative interviews indicated that student engagement was enhanced and that the academic quality of student work did not diminish. For many students quality was distinctly improved. However in relation to student-generated tasks, teachers were concerned that students had not used their time effectively and reported being reluctant to adjust student-generated activities, in terms of offering direction or structure. The students suggested they would prefer a negotiated approach in place of the theoretical, directed way learning was ~~usually~~ sometimes structured, due to the fact that they were involved in making learning choices and tasks were relevant and built around their interests. Students did not believe that academic quality had been sacrificed and they felt their learning was more effective because they were interested. Consistent with teacher perceptions, students also reported lower levels of challenge in the student-generated tasks.

The NSW QTF suggests that through careful design it is possible to construct tasks which have high levels of relevance and intellectual challenge within an environment conducive to learning (Ladwig, 2009). These classrooms demonstrated a number of elements consistent with creating a *Quality Learning Environment.* These included high expectations, positive relationships, supportive learning culture, independence, responsibility and valuing all contributions. As Killen (2007) suggests, the lack of consistent and comprehensive implementation of the QTF can be attributed to a lack of explicit understanding, not only of terminology, but of the links between the dimensions. In order to address this concern, and as this study demonstrated, it is essential for teachers to have access to with professional learning opportunities that challenge traditional thinking about knowledge and curriculum. Professional learning should develop teachers' understanding of QTF dimensions in relation to their ability to design, implement and engage students in intellectually challenging and relevant tasks within a supportive classroom environment.

A brief description of two learning tasks has been included to demonstrate how each of the activities may have been modified to involve greater intellectual challenge.

Learning Task 1 – Discography of a contemporary songwriter

Learning Task 1 was a small group, cooperative learning task. The activity was suggested by quite motivated Year 10 English students, the purpose of which was to research and report on the life and work, or discography, of a contemporary songwriter or poet. Each group of students worked within a flexible classroom timetable and the task was largely undirected by the teacher. The groups were responsible for presenting their research to the class at the completion of the task.

Observation of some of the student presentations revealed that the quality of student research and their subsequent reporting was superficial. Presentations were descriptive and focused on an artist's biographical information and a chronological overview of their career, including a listing of the body of work and reference to their most influential works. The presentations lacked critical evaluation, which could have included an appraisal of the literary merit of the work; a consideration of the ways contemporary critics or peers had responded to the work; the impact of the work; and a comparison with other writers within the genre or period. Inclusion of some of these ideas would potentially enrich the level of challenge of the task and add significantly to the intellectual learning of all participants during the presentations. This is an example of a student-suggested task that the teacher could have helped develop by adding additional, explicit dimensions or questions so that the level of challenge could be substantially raised and *Significance* retained.

Learning Task 2 - Researching the practical applications of 'Pi'

This was an individual task given to the top Year 8 mathematics class. During the negotiation phase students communicated a desire to use computers more in mathematics and consequently, this lesson took place in a computer room. The task involved students accessing various websites in order to complete a range of questions on the task sheet provided by the teacher. The task sheet had a 'free options' section, which incorporated some of the ideas these 13 and 14 year-old students had suggested. The ideas included designing a T-shirt logo using the concept of Pi; finding the world record on the internet for the most number of decimal places for Pi that have been committed to memory; and writing a poem about Pi.

Researcher observation suggested that the students engaged in a superficial manner, completing the task quickly and with little thought or effort. Those designing a T-short logo downloaded a design from the internet site provided by the teacher rather than creating one of their own; and the few poems were hastily written and poorly presented. The intellectual engagement associated with the students' ideas was not fully exploited by the teacher, who

may have asked students to critique or analyse popular applications and expressions of Pi in a more rigorous way. Students may also have been asked to critique and justify their own work, or that of their peers, using criteria around quality and intellectual effort that had already been discussed with them.

Pertinent literature and classroom practices observed in this study suggests that teachers understand the idea of relevance, or the QTF dimension *Significance,* as relating to the ordinary, practical or everyday experience. Because of this they tend not connect it with *Intellectual Quality* because everyday experience is not generally perceived to be intellectually challenging or engaging. Teachers needed support in understanding that relevance is concerned with the applicability of learning in the context of students' out-of-school lives as well as their place in a local and global society. *Significance* is essentially about making connections between the various contexts experienced in life, thereby increasing the accessibility of new forms of knowledge and learning (Killen, 2007; Ladwig, 2009).

Intellectual challenge is often associated with abstract or theoretical thinking in the practice of teachers, and it is generally reserved for theoretical areas of the curriculum. A broader and more integrated view of intellectual challenge is offered by the QTF which, in essence, constructs intellectual challenge as critical or 'deep thinking'. This is achieved through interacting with real world contexts, personal responses to concepts and the application of knowledge to life. This is consistent with the cognitive levels put forward in Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohld, 2001; Bloom, 1956), which differentiates between more factual and descriptive levels of cognitive activity to deeper ones involving synthesis, analysis and evaluation. Accepting this broader conceptualisation of intellectual challenge means it is integral for teachers to understand that all forms of learning applicable to their students' lives, including knowledge that is 'significant' in QTF terms can generate deep forms of thinking. Teachers require support in creating challenging tasks across all knowledge domains relevant to their students.

Despite the relatively positive response to the project by both teachers and particularly students, the project and its outcomes held little practical interest for head teachers and other school executive, and was basically invisible back in the school's departments. As researchers, we came to realise that we could have assisted the participant teachers more in garnering visibility and support. It was the general lack of sustainability around negotiated learning that caused the researchers to reflect upon their own practices as researchers in the school, the school as a site of innovation, and the sorts of Teacher Professional Learning approaches required to sustain teachers in persevering with innovations like *WALK*. In response to this research experience, researchers felt that teachers needed to be supported in the implementation of learning experiences that adequately reflect the elements of the NSW QTF and therefore, teacher professional learning emerged as a germane concern. The following discussion offers some suggestions regarding the nature and direction of Teacher Professional Learning. This also has important ramifications and implications when considering the nature of teacher education.

Further Discussion: Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

Considering the professional learning of teachers from a collaborative perspective requires a rethinking of how professional learning occurs most effectively. According to Webster-Wright (2009) professional learning needs to be redefined or reconceptualised and the way professional learning is conceived directly influences the way professional learning 'is done'. She also contends that current understandings regarding professional development are limited and ignore research. Although research shows the inefficacy of training undertaken away from the school setting, it continues to be common practice and it generally follows that what is learned in these situations is not implemented or integrated into a teacher's school life. This form of professional development indicates an underlying belief that learning has a distinct beginning and end. Glazer and Hannafin (2006) comment that little evidence exists in support of such disconnected training. Instead, they advocate a collaborative and situated model grounded in the mentor-protégé relationship. Their 'collaborative apprenticeship model' puts forward a mutually beneficial and "reciprocal" (p.180) system in which teachers support each other and work together in the context of their everyday school life. Likewise, Ferguson-Patrick (2010) reports on "cooperative learning as a pedagogical strategy" (p.389) for the professional development of early career teachers. In order to create and maintain effective professional learning it must be an approach embedded in the daily practice of those involved (Ferguson-Patrick, 2010; Helmer, Bartlett, Wolgemuth & Lea, 2011). In other words, sustainable professional learning is shaped by context. Contextual or situated learning is also discussed by Aubusson, Steele, Dinham and Brady (2007) and advocated as an essential element inherent in communities of practice. To be successful, "school-initiated professional learning" (p.134) should ultimately transform practice and must be sustained by the whole school community without the ongoing assistance of outside institutions. Aubusson et al. promote action learning – "teacher research as a way of promoting teacher learning" (p.134) – as a method for continuing professional learning and one which epitomises situated, context-specific learning. There is a significant body of research which supports collaborative approaches to professional learning (Anderson & Kumari, 2009; Aubusson et al., 2007; Ferguson-Patrick, 2010; Glazer & Hannafin, 2006; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake & Olivier, 2008) and despite some minor differences in terminology and approach there is general consensus that collaboration between teachers in the school setting is an effective tool which not only improves pedagogical practice but subsequently improves the learning outcomes of students.

Professional learning embedded in the practice of a school means that development occurs within the context of that learning and the benefit of this approach is similar to that described in Vygotskian socio-cultural theory and an emergent context where the culture within which a teacher works plays a significant role in what is learned and how it is learned (Fox, 2000; Webster-Wright, 2009). Martins and Terblanche (2003) advocate that organisational culture either supports or impedes its staff members, particularly in terms of creativity. This is also reflected in a collaborative and supportive environment such as a professional learning community where teachers can feel secure to develop their own practice by trying new things (Aubusson et al., 2007). Fundamental to the culture of any organisation is its leadership and in a very real sense this leadership determines and sustains the culture (Hipp et al., 2008; Martins & Terblanche, 2003). Martins and Terblanche (2003) contend that the values of teamwork, cooperation and flexibility are conducive to generating a successful culture of creativity and shared responsibility, and that leaders assume a significant role in maintaining and supporting staff within that culture. Hipp et al. (2008) advocate shared leadership in the school setting. Professional learning communities are particularly suited to this approach where teachers become collectively responsible for the pedagogical leadership of the school community and engage in this discourse collaboratively and meaningfully. The role of a primary leader is still significant but it is redefined rather than superseded. In this

setting, teachers are responsible for issues surrounding curriculum and pedagogy whilst the principal or administrator ensures that all necessary support is provided to make the system successful. Lambert (2007) reiterates the importance of "high leadership capacity" (p.312) in creating "sustainable school improvement" (p.311). For professional learning to continue and improve school culture and the quality of student learning it must have the support of a collective commitment to such pursuits and the practical support, guidance and facilitation of a leader equally committed to the vision of the school community. Whilst there is research in this area indicating positive responses to the implementation of professional learning communities and other similar structures, there is a need for the philosophies underpinning these structures to become a reality and part of everyday school community practice.

In the initial stages of this research, the Principal and participating teachers were provided with an explanation of the project and the 'Learning to WALK' process. The teachers were also scaffolded in discussing the process with their students and help in designing the negotiated learning plans. In the event, all participants expressed satisfaction with these processes and with the project outcomes, and the Principal expressed a desire to have these approaches continue within the school. Nonetheless, the strategies were not continued beyond the scope of the project because the type of engagement experienced by the teachers in their situated context was isolated, fragmented and transitory. We have subsequently realised that this reflects a limitation of the project and our approach to supporting these teachers, in that the three teachers involved were working in isolation from the general body of staff and the strategic priorities of the school. The professional learning of these teachers was, therefore, left to themselves and the research team, and in such circumstances was likely to be insufficient to support them. As researchers, it was our responsibility to try to negotiate a more embedded and supportive environment for this project. These elements of difficulty around teacher professional learning are consistent with research literature surrounding effective professional learning and the need for teachers to feel supported by each other in a collaborative and committed group of likeminded professionals (Anderson & Kumari, 2009; Aubusson et al., 2007; Ferguson-Patrick, 2010; Glazer & Hannafin, 2006; Helmer et al., 2011; Hipp et al., 2008). A more effective way to conduct this project and subsequent research would have been through an embedded approach (Helmer et al., 2011) which would seek to build a broader understanding and commitment to integrating the dimensions of the NSW QTF in a school-wide culture of quality.

Building communities of practice or professional learning communities as a means of creating and maintaining significant professional development and learning requires a commitment from the whole school. In this way, the approach becomes a natural part of the everyday workings of the school day – an embedded approach (Ferguson-Patrick, 2010; Hipp et al., 2008). As stated, this was one of the limitations evident in this study where participating teachers were involved in a process separate from the rest of their colleagues and the school community as a whole. Because the project was 'owned' by the researchers, and not sufficiently owned by the teacher and student participants, the study had an unintentional 'top down' approach. This has been criticised by Aubusson et al. (2007), and is seen to limit the creation of professional learning communities simply because it relies on outside stimulus or assistance (in this case, university) to generate any change or development. The failure of this project to achieve sustainability was highlighted when, after the researchers left the site, the strategy was no longer implemented by the school. For something that was generally agreed by all concerned be an effective strategy, this is a great pity.

In spite of some associated limitations, our research experience has definite implications for teacher professional learning. In particular it suggests that it is essential to provide professional learning experiences which lead to sustainable pedagogical change in schools. The research findings also suggest, and this paper, therefore, proposes, that the way

to achieve this sustainable pedagogical change is through collaborative approaches which involve staff working together to improve their practice and supporting each other within a school-wide culture of quality and commitment. Approaches of this nature involve collaborative innovation and distributed leadership amongst teachers, and come from a variety of traditions including 'practitioner enquiry' (Cochrane-Smith & Donnell, 2006), 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 2006), 'learning communities' (Blankstein, 2004; Fullan, 1998; Fullan & St. Germain, 2006), 'sustainable professionalism' (Fasoli, Woodrow & Scrivens, 2007) and 'distributed leadership' (Spillane, 2005). They are characterised by a commitment to improving the school community, teaching practice and student learning; a shared responsibility for the creation of knowledge, development of skills and understanding; mutual respect; engaging in constant dialogue with colleagues; and interacting with a genuine desire for quality (Aubusson et al., 2007; Glazer & Hannafin, 2006).

Conclusion

This paper reported on the implementation of the *Learning to WALK* strategy and the ways in which the dimensions of the NSW Quality Teaching Framework were conceived and practised. It was found that even in this negotiated learning process, *Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment* and *Significance* were generally practised as discrete and disconnected from each other, having more emphasis placed on the importance of *Intellectual Quality* and a lack of connection between Intellectual Quality and *Significance* or relevance. The need for particular and sustainable forms of support for teachers in their professional learning became evident and arising out of this discussion emerged the notion of professional learning communities and supportive leadership structures which offer schools an opportunity to engage with each other in collaborative communities committed to shared goals, shared responsibility, shared leadership and the continuing commitment to improving teacher practice and ultimately, student learning.

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Appendix One - The Challenge Checklist

CHALLENGE CHECKLIST – A Student Checklist for Improving Learning

This form allows you to provide information to improve your learning. Please complete the questions below honestly. Nothing you write on this checklist will allow you to be identified.

WHAT I THINK				WHAT I FEEL	
1. How **MUCH** work was there to do?					
Lots	A fair bit	Not much	Very little	☺	☹
2. How **DIFFICULT** was the work?					
Really difficult	Fairly difficult	Not very difficult	Not difficult at all	☺	☹
3. How **IMPORTANT** was the work for me to know?					
Very important	Quite important	Not very important	Not important at all	☺	☹
4. How **INTERESTING** were the topics that I did?					
Very	Reasonably	Not very	Not at all	☺	☹
5. How often did I do **DIFFERENT** and **UNUSUAL** things in class?					
A lot	Sometimes	Not much	Not at all	☺	☹
6. How often was I given opportunities to **THINK HARD** about the work?					
A lot	Sometimes	Not much	Not at all	☺	☹
7. How often did I do **PRACTICAL** activities and exercises?					
A lot	Sometimes	Not much	Not at all	☺	☹
8. How often did **I DECIDE** what to do and how to do it?					
A lot	Sometimes	Not much	Not at all	☺	☹
9. The teacher and I **GOT ON WELL** together during the lessons.					
All the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	Not much of the time	☺	☹
10. The other students and I **GOT ON WELL** together during the lessons.					
All the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	Not much of the time	☺	☹
11. My classroom is a good **PLACE TO LEARN** this subject.					
Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	☺	☹
12. I **PARTICIPATED ACTIVELY** in class work:					
All the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	Not much of the time	☺	☹
13. I **UNDERSTOOD**:					
All the work	Most of the work	Some of the work	Not much of the work	☺	☹
14. I **ENJOYED:**					
All the work	Most of the work	Some of the work	Not much of the work	☺	☹
15. I think **I WORKED WELL**:					
All the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	Not much of the time	☺	☹

☺☺☺ THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP ☺☺☺

This questionnaire was developed by Dr John Baird (Melbourne University) and others.