

## **FINAL REPORT**

# **EVALUATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE SUSTAINABILITY OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THROUGH SCHOOL-BASED ACTION LEARNING**

**Dr Garry Hoban**  
**Associate Professor Tony Herrington**  
**Dr Lisa Kervin**  
**The Faculty of Education**  
**University of Wollongong**

**Associate Professor Robyn Ewing**  
**Dr Judy Anderson**  
**Dr David Smith**  
**The Division of Professional Learning**  
**Faculty of Education and Social Work**  
**University of Sydney**



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# EVALUATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE SUSTAINABILITY OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THROUGH SCHOOL BASED ACTION LEARNING

## SECTION 1.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### 1.1 Purpose of the Research

This final report documents outcomes of the research project entitled, *Evaluative inquiry into the sustainability of professional learning through school-based action learning* conducted during October–December 2004. The purpose of this evaluative inquiry was to ascertain how teachers' engagement in the AGQTP activity, *Action learning for school teams* (phase 1), might provide a platform to sustain teachers' professional learning in schools.

The AGQTP activity, *Action learning for school teams*, occurred in schools from the beginning of Term 4, 2003 to the end of Term 1, 2004. Hence, the evaluative inquiry was conducted two school terms (approximately 6 months) after the original funding of projects ceased. The major objective of the inquiry was to ascertain what conditions enabled teachers' professional learning, initiated by the project, to be sustained in some way.

The three research questions that guided the study were:

1. What are the professional support needs, challenges and consequences for teachers who engage in action learning?
2. What is the capacity of the school and the individual action learning team members to sustain and build professional learning and growth after the *Action learning for school teams* project was completed?
3. To what extent has the action learning team been able to transfer knowledge to others in the school community?

## 1.2 The Academic Research Team

The academic research team included researchers from The University of Wollongong and The University of Sydney.

### *University of Wollongong*

Dr Garry Hoban (Team Leader)  
Senior Lecturer  
Science Education & Teacher Education  
Faculty of Education  
University of Wollongong  
Wollongong NSW 2522  
02 4221 4450  
garry\_hoban@uow.edu.au

Associate Professor Tony Herrington  
Director, Information Technology  
Faculty of Education  
University of Wollongong  
Wollongong NSW 2522  
02 4221 4643  
tony\_herrington@uow.edu.au

Dr Lisa Kervin  
Lecturer, Literacy Education  
Faculty of Education  
University of Wollongong  
Wollongong NSW 2522  
lisa\_kervin@uow.edu.au

### *University of Sydney*

Associate Professor Robyn Ewing (Team Leader)  
Director, Division of Professional Learning  
Faculty of Education and Social Work  
University of Sydney NSW 2006  
02 9351 3846; 02 9351 6383  
r.ewing@edfac.usyd.edu.au

Dr Judy Anderson  
Coordinator, Professional Development  
Division of Professional Learning  
Faculty of Education and Social Work  
University of Sydney NSW 2006  
02 9351 6264 ; 02 9351 6383  
j.anderson@edfac.usyd.edu.au

Dr David Smith  
Educational Consultant  
31 Jendi Ave  
Bayview NSW 2104  
02 9940 1560  
dlanglely@optusnet.com.au

## 1.3 Nature of the Research

An evaluative inquiry is a form of evaluation which involves the participants in the process of collecting and analysing data in regard to a change process in which they have been involved (Cousins & Earl, 1995; Preskill & Torres, 1999). In this study the program is the AGQTP activity, *Action learning for school teams*, the participants are small groups of teachers from thirteen schools who had been involved in this project together with an academic team member and the stakeholders are the academic research team from The University of Wollongong and The University of Sydney together with the NSW Department of Education and Training.

The academic research team members collaborated with the school inquiry teams to help them to gather, analyse and interpret evidence about sustainable professional learning in schools. One researcher from the research team was assigned to work with two school teams. The role of the academic researcher was to act as a facilitator and help the teachers to develop and conduct the evaluative inquiry to address the three research questions. This included guiding the teachers using the research framework and giving support at critical points. The role of the school inquiry team was to collect evidence to address the three research questions and to participate in data analysis and interpretation. The academic team member was responsible for writing a case study for the final report. The research team then analysed all the data collected through the case studies.

## 1.4 Research Framework

There were four phases of the project:

### Phase 1: Planning

The academic research team leaders prepared a research plan (Appendix 1) that explained the purpose, research framework, the three research questions, possible sub-questions, phases of the evaluative inquiry, roles of the academics and teachers, and timeframe for the research. Teachers completed the planning sheet (Appendix 2).

### Phase 2: Focusing the Inquiry

An academic team member visited each school to help the inquiry team to generate sub-questions and identify appropriate forms of evidence to address the three research questions. The three research questions and possible sub-questions are listed below:

1. What are the professional support needs, challenges and consequences for teachers who engage in action learning?
  - a. What factors supported or inhibited your participation in the action learning project?
  - b. What benefits were gained by team members participating in the project? What drawbacks/challenges resulted from participation?
  - c. What effect has the project had on team members' understanding of professional learning and classroom practice?
2. What is the capacity of the school and the individual action learning team members to sustain and build professional learning and growth after the *Action learning for school teams* project was completed?
  - a. Has the action learning team continued after Term 1 this year? If so what kinds of activities have been undertaken? Have others participated in the activities? Who?
  - b. What has encouraged the team to continue?
  - c. From the action learning experience, how has the school sustained and built upon teachers' professional learning?
  - d. What have the team members learned about their own professional development by being involved in the project?
3. To what extent has the action learning team been able to transfer knowledge to others in the school community?
  - a. Did the team members convey knowledge/skills/strategies developed from the project to others in the school? How?
  - b. Did other teachers in the school adopt/adapt the team approach? How?
  - c. What has been the influence on student learning in the school?

### Phase 3: Carrying Out the Inquiry

Teachers gathered evidence to address each research question in the context of their action learning. They sent it to the academic team member who helped with analysis of the data. The academic team member maintained contact with their allocated schools via email or phone to assist at critical points. An interim report was provided to DET based on initial analysis of data.

### Phase 4: Reflection and Action

Each school was visited twice by their academic team member to help teachers reflect upon the analysis of the data and to tease out any relevant issues. One issue to be considered was whether this form of evaluative inquiry had been a worthwhile process and whether their involvement had helped teachers build their capabilities to research practice in their own schools. The academic team member wrote the case study with the help of the teachers (see Appendix 3 for headings). A draft copy of the case was provided to each school to check for accuracy.

## **1.5 Methodology for Each School's Evaluative Inquiry**

Because each school project was different and the evaluative inquiry was intended to suit the particular context, the methodologies used in each school varied. This reflects the diversity of school-based teams conducting an evaluative inquiry about their own school-based project. In many of the evaluative inquiries, a mixed mode methodology was used incorporating a survey in conjunction with follow-up qualitative data gathering. This diversity of methodologies is a strength of the evaluative inquiry as it mirrors the range of projects and schools involved.

## **1.6 Ethical Conduct**

The key issues that needed to be addressed in the current research were those relating to anonymity of participants and schools, confidentiality, authenticity of data and the security of data, its storage and destruction. The inquiry conformed to the guidelines of the NSW DET Strategic Research Directorate, the Universities of Wollongong and Sydney Human Ethics Committee, and the Australasian Evaluation Society.

**1.7 Thirteen Case Studies** are included in section three of this report.

## **1.8 Summary Analysis of Evaluative Inquiry**

All case study schools were able to identify strategies used to sustain their professional learning to different extents during the period of the evaluative inquiry. While some schools emphasised the quality teaching framework, others focused on the action learning process. A third group were able to explore both the content of the NSW quality teaching model and the action learning process.

## 1.9 Factors Identified as Important in Sustaining Professional Learning through Action Learning

A number of factors that supported professional learning were identified to a greater or lesser extent in each case study school. These derived from each school's *workplace conditions*, including their historical and organizational contexts, together with the *process* (action learning) and the *content* for the projects (in this case, initially, the NSW quality teaching model, in relation to each teacher's practice in one or more AGQTP priority areas). These enabling factors are represented in Figure 1 below:

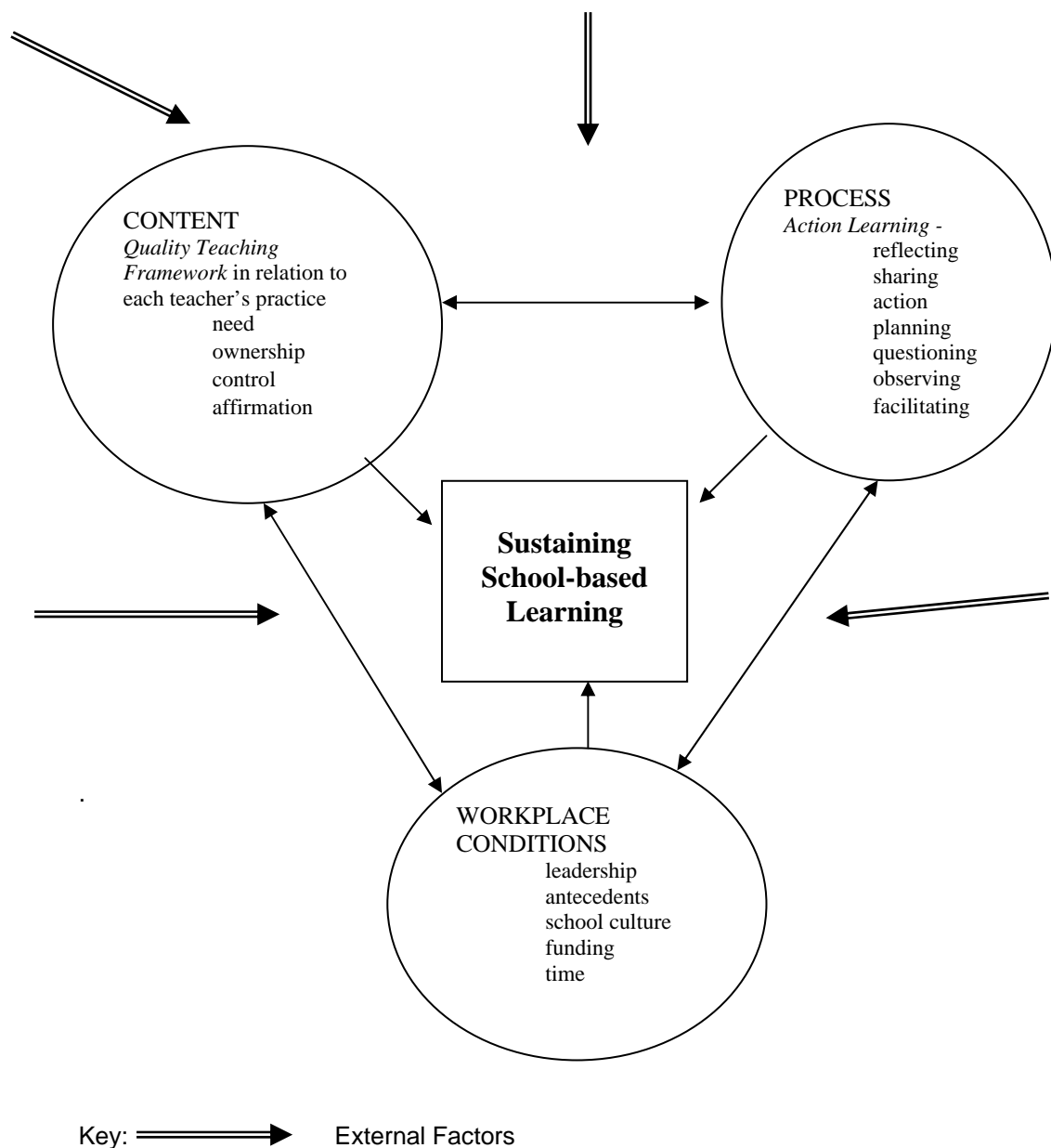


Figure 1: An emerging model for sustainable school-based professional learning

### *Workplace conditions:*

In each school a number of enabling conditions were already present:

- **Antecedent conditions prior to the inquiry:**  
All schools had participated in previous projects associated with school change. As a result of such experiences participating teachers were accepting of the need for change in schools and significant numbers of staff, if not all staff, were prepared to try new ideas and innovations.
- **Elements of professional learning communities established:**  
In all schools there were elements of professional learning communities (Hargreaves, 2003, Ewing, 2002, Hoban, 2002) established to varying degrees. In some schools, particularly secondary schools, these were only characteristic of some groups of staff. In other schools, particularly several of the primary schools, they were characteristic of all teaching staff. Such characteristics included a realization that teaching was a learning profession and that each teacher has a professional responsibility to continue their own professional learning.
- **Attitudes of teaching staff to change:**  
In all the case study schools the general attitude of participating teaching staff was that change was a necessary and an essential ingredient of a healthy and effective school.
- **Integration into the organizational structures of the school:**  
In all schools, professional learning projects were integral to the plans, policies and structures of the school, and, in some cases had been for a number of years.
- **Leadership of the principal and executive:**  
Active supportive leadership of the principal was central to the sustainability of the action learning in every school. In some cases this leadership was more direct and directive, in which the principal or other members of the executive had a 'hands-on' role in the project, than others.

### *Process Factors:*

There were also a number of factors derived from the processes used by teams that enabled the action learning to be sustained:

- **Knowledge and skills of the processes of action learning:**  
Team members in the case study schools demonstrated different degrees of understanding of the nature and stages in action learning and skills in its implementation. This was generally derived from the first round of the AGQTP *Action learning for school teams* activities.
- **Funds to release teachers from normal classroom teaching for planning, discussion and reflection:**  
There is no doubt that for all case study schools funding to release teachers from normal classes, providing opportunities for teams to meet and work together, was one of the most important factors in sustaining action learning. At times, particularly for schools in rural areas, it was difficult to find sufficient appropriately trained relief teachers.

- Leadership of the action learning team(s):  
Leadership within action learning teams was a vital factor in sustaining the action learning in case study schools. Leadership responsibilities included those of administrative arrangements related to organizing time, locations and agendas for various meetings; essential communication between team members and between the team and other members of the executive and staff in the school; negotiations with evaluative inquiry project investigators and, in some cases, academic partners; ensuring that the team remained clearly directed and focused on their work; and, maintaining a positive emotional climate within the team, building cohesion but, at the same time allowing for individual viewpoints and constructive critique.

*Content Factors:*

This project focussed on the need for schools to explore the NSW quality teaching framework. While schools did this in a range of different ways, the *content* for the projects centred around this system priority.

- Observable positive impact on student learning outcomes:  
An important factor in case schools sustaining and extending action learning for quality teaching was the fact that teachers could see that the quality teaching framework and elements were directly related to the core business of their classrooms and the school.
- Commitment by original team members to other teachers' opportunities for learning:  
In a number of cases, members of original action learning teams explicitly stated a felt commitment to not only share their experiences with other teachers, but to use their understandings and skills gained in the first round of the action learning for quality teaching project to provide opportunities for other staff to gain knowledge of quality teaching and develop skills related to action learning for professional development.

*Additional External Factors:*

There were also some factors external to the schools that were important in at least some of the case study schools:

- Acknowledgment derived from presentations to other schools and teachers:  
One of the factors that sustained original team members and motivated them to continue to expand action learning in their schools was the opportunity to share their experience and project with others. A large number of the original action learning teams in case study schools were invited to present at numerous regional, state or national conferences or to other schools in their regions. The opportunity to share and publish their achievements and experiences was a significant factor in sustaining their work.
- Academic partners:  
Effective relationships with academic partners either developed or continued in the original action learning project was also an important factor for some teams in the extension of action learning in their school.
- School community:  
In several schools integrating the parents and community members into the extended action learning project was important. Parents were often provided with information regarding quality teaching elements and how these were being developed in

classrooms. They thus became not only partners with their children in their learning but also strong advocates of providing the professional learning opportunities for teachers in the school.

### **1.10 Challenges to Sustaining Action Learning:**

There were also a number of factors that challenged and, in some cases, restricted the level of sustainability of action learning processes:

- **Increasing busyness of teachers' working lives:**  
Terms 2, 3 and 4, 2004 was the time for sustaining the action learning. In a number of instances, teams talked of the increasing demands on their work as the year progressed. The most difficult term identified was, as might be expected, Term 4. From all evidence, it would appear that it is Terms 2 and 3 that are the most useful for release time for professional development. This issue underlines the importance of providing release time from normal teaching duties for teachers if professional learning and development effectiveness is to be optimized. This in turn has implications for funding for teacher release.
- **Availability of appropriate teacher relief:**  
Related to the factor above is the issue of availability of sufficient appropriately qualified relief teachers in the immediate vicinity of the school. This was a particular issue for schools in rural locations.
- **Negative attitudes of staff engendered by the experience of the first round:**  
In at least one case the current team leaders were dealing with the negative attitudes of staff towards action learning and quality teaching. This issue highlights the challenge of effective communication and managing emerging conflicts, often because of misperceptions during any process of school change.

### **1.11 Benefits Gained from Participation in the Evaluative Inquiry:**

All teams in case study schools expressed perceived benefits that they had derived from participating in the evaluative inquiry:

- **Opportunity to evaluate, reflect and develop future plans:**  
Probably the most commonly expressed benefit was the time and opportunity participating in the evaluative inquiry had provided for teams, and thus schools to evaluate the goals, focus, organization and processes of their action learning and to plan future action learning processes as part of their whole-school development/strategic plan.
- **Developing skills and strategies for the collection and analysis of data:**  
All teams in case study schools reported that participation in the evaluative inquiry had provided the opportunity to work with an academic team member who assisted them in developing appropriate instruments to gather the information they had identified.

## 1.12 Conclusions and Recommendations

There are several issues that emerge from the experience of investigating the sustainability of action learning in the case study schools. These issues are identified from the experience of the investigators and their interpretation of the data gathered.

- **Collegiality Vs ‘Contrived Collegiality’:**  
One of the most frequently cited results of participation in the initial action learning project and what followed this during the remainder of 2004 was the level of collegiality that had formed within project teams and, in some cases, generally primary schools, across entire schools as a result of the action learning. Hargreaves (2003) recently reported Canadian research which demonstrated that after a change project had ended the levels of collegiality attained during the project lessened because there was no longer an explicit motivation to support its continuance. An important question is whether the experience noted by Hargreaves will characterize the case study schools in NSW. It would be interesting to see if the frequency of team meetings, and thus opportunities to maintain levels of collegiality, are maintained or increase in early 2005 and beyond.
- **Funding for teacher learning:**  
There is no doubt that the single most important factor in the ability of case study schools to sustain action learning was the provision of resources for release time of teachers. One of the key issues will be the degree to which similar levels of funding can be made available both within schools and from the system for teacher learning.
- **A deeper understanding of the processes of action learning as a professional learning tool:**  
In several case study schools it is evident that additional time needs to be spent in understanding the ongoing nature of the action learning process and its applicability to other professional learning issues.

## Recommendations

- 5.1 Because schools have different levels of understanding of the action learning process, there needs to be more emphasis on upskilling teachers and academic partners in using action learning as a tool for professional learning at the beginning of a project.**

(Although this has been addressed to some extent in the second phase AGQTP activity, *Quality teaching action learning*, it is clear that more professional learning needs to be undertaken in this area.)

- 5.2 It was evident from the study that the momentum for professional learning slowed down after the funding for phase one of the project finished. Ways need to be sought, both at school and system levels, to enable school teams to gain time for further planning, action, observation, discussion, reflection and evaluation. This includes both formal and informal professional learning conversations which could be incorporated into the professional learning component of school management plans.**

- 5.3 As demonstrated by the use of the NSW model of pedagogy, continuity is important in terms of the content of professional learning. Teachers may need several years to come to terms with this model in their own situations. In some cases and for some teachers the NSW model of pedagogy has become a conceptual framework for teachers to analyse their practice. It is therefore strongly recommended that **there needs to be continuity in the content focus (i.e a curriculum initiative) for the school-based change projects.**
- 5.4 Schools have only just started on the process of understanding quality teaching, using action learning as a professional learning tool, and using it as a framework to inquire into current practices. Developing a culture of professional learning within a school can take several years. **A longitudinal evaluative inquiry over several years should be commenced to monitor sustainability and conditions for its effectiveness (workplace, process and content) over a longer time frame.**
- 5.5 It is clear that there are different combinations of the enabling conditions described in the model above. **Longitudinal research should particularly concentrate on those schools that have demonstrated all three enabling conditions, as examples of best practice.**
- 5.6 All schools found the evaluative process worthwhile as a scaffold for evaluating the sustainability of change and teacher learning. It provided teachers with support in terms of systematic data gathering, analysis and theorising about their own practice. It is therefore essential that **professional learning about systematic data gathering and analysis, promoting school-based teacher research, continue to be available to schools and be an important element of any further systemic school-based change.**

## SECTION 2.

### CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

#### 2.1 Purpose of the Research

This final report documents outcomes of the research project entitled, *Evaluative inquiry into the sustainability of professional learning through school-based action learning*, conducted during October–December, 2004. The purpose of this evaluative inquiry was to ascertain how teachers' engagement in the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program (AGQTP) activity, *Action learning for school teams* (Phase 1), might provide a platform to sustain teachers' professional learning in schools.

The AGQTP activity, *Action learning for school teams*, occurred in schools from the beginning of Term 4, 2003 to the end of Term 1, 2004. Hence the evaluative inquiry was conducted two school terms (approximately 6 months) after the original project funding ceased. The major objective of the inquiry was to ascertain what conditions enabled teachers' professional learning, initiated by the project, to be sustained in some way.

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3. To what extent has the action learning team been able to transfer knowledge to others in the school community?

## 2.2 The Academic Research Team

The academic research team included researchers from The University of Wollongong and The University of Sydney.

### *University of Wollongong*

Dr Garry Hoban (Team Leader)  
Senior Lecturer  
Science Education & Teacher Education  
Faculty of Education  
University of Wollongong  
Wollongong NSW 2522  
02 4221 4450  
garry\_hoban@uow.edu.au

### *University of Sydney*

Associate Professor Robyn Ewing (Team Leader)  
Director, Division of Professional Learning  
Faculty of Education and Social Work  
University of Sydney NSW 2006  
02 9351 3846; 02 9351 6383  
r.ewing@edfac.usyd.edu.au

Associate Professor Tony Herrington  
Director, Information Technology  
Faculty of Education  
University of Wollongong  
Wollongong NSW 2522  
02 4221 4643  
tony\_herrington@uow.edu.au

Dr Judy Anderson  
Coordinator, Professional Development  
Division of Professional Learning  
Faculty of Education and Social Work  
University of Sydney NSW 2006  
02 9351 6264 ; 02 9351 6383  
j.anderson@edfac.usyd.edu.au

Dr Lisa Kervin  
Lecturer, Literacy Education  
Faculty of Education  
University of Wollongong  
Wollongong NSW 2522  
lisa\_kervin@uow.edu.au

Dr David Smith  
Educational Consultant  
31 Jendi Ave  
Bayview NSW 2104  
02 9940 1560  
dlanglely@optusnet.com.au

## 2.3 Nature of the Evaluative Inquiry

An evaluative inquiry is a form of evaluation that involves the participants in the process of collecting and analysing data in regard to a change process in which they have been involved (Cousins & Earl, 1995; Preskill & Torres, 1999). This form of evaluation works with 'stakeholders and program participants (1) to collaboratively determine the strengths and weaknesses of various organizational programs, services, products, practices, processes, and systems, so that the organization may grow and develop; and (2) to maintain a climate that supports the continuous learning of all employees' (Preskill & Torres, 1999, p. 186).

In this study the program is the AGQTP activity, *Action learning for school teams*, the participants are a small group of teachers from schools who had been involved in the original project and an academic team member. The stakeholders are the academic research team from The University of Wollongong and The University of Sydney, together with the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET).

Preskill and Torres (1999) suggest that there are three stages of an evaluative inquiry:

- (i) focusing the inquiry
- (ii) carrying out the inquiry
- (iii) applying the learning.

According to Preskill and Torres (1999), ‘as each of the inquiry phases is implemented, organizational members come together to engage in the learning processes of (a) dialogue, (b) reflection, (c) asking questions, and (d) identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge’ (p. 52). They emphasise that these learning processes are not linear but, rather, are woven through the phases in a non-linear, dynamic way. Importantly, these learning processes are consistent with those also used in action learning, which was a focus of the *Action learning for school teams* activity.

A central feature of this type of inquiry is the relationship between the academic research team and the school inquiry team. The academic research team members collaborated with the school inquiry teams to help them to gather, analyse and interpret evidence about sustainable professional learning in schools. Each researcher from the research team was assigned to work with two or three school teams. The role of the academic researcher was to act as a facilitator and help the teachers to develop and conduct the evaluative inquiry to address the three research questions. This included guiding the teachers in using the research framework and giving support at critical points. As such, features of this evaluative inquiry included:

- drawing on local resources and capacities
- recognising the wisdom and knowledge of teachers
- demonstrating that teachers are creative and knowledgeable about their environment;
- ensuring that all members of the school inquiry team are part of the decision-making process
- using academic team members, who act as catalysts and who assist the school inquiry team in asking key questions.

The role of the school inquiry team was to collect evidence to address the three research questions and to participate in data analysis and interpretation. The academic team member was responsible for writing a case study for the final report. The research team then analysed all the data collected through the case studies.

## **2.4 Phases of the evaluative inquiry**

The research framework for this evaluative inquiry was adapted from the work of Preskill and Torres (1999) and had four phases deduced from previous works on evaluation (Cousins & Earl, 1995; Patton, 1997; Preskill & Torres, 1999).

### **Phase 1. Planning**

The academic research team leaders prepared a research plan that explained the purpose, research framework, the three research questions, possible sub-questions, phases of the evaluative inquiry, roles of the academics and teachers, and timeframe for the research. This plan was posted to the principal in each school, who distributed it to members of the school inquiry team (see Appendix 1). The contact person from each school was phoned to clarify the research framework, discuss the research plan

and make arrangements for the first visit by the academic team member. Teachers completed the planning sheet (see Appendix 2) in preparation for the visit in Phase 2.

### Phase 2. Focusing the Inquiry

An academic visited each school to help the inquiry team to generate sub-questions and identify appropriate forms of evidence to address the three research questions. Individual teachers could choose to be responsible for one question each or work on the questions collectively. The three research questions and possible sub-questions are listed below:

1. What are the professional support needs, challenges and consequences for teachers who engage in action learning?
  - a. What factors supported or inhibited your participation in the action learning project?
  - b. What benefits were gained by team members participating in the project? What drawbacks/challenges resulted from participation?
  - c. What effect has the project had on team members' understanding of professional learning and classroom practice?
2. What is the capacity of the school and the individual action learning team members to sustain and build professional learning and growth after the *Action learning for school teams* project was completed?
  - a. Has the action learning team continued after Term 1 this year? If so what kinds of activities have been undertaken? Have others participated in the activities? Who?
  - b. What has encouraged the team to continue?
  - c. From the action learning experience, how has the school sustained and built upon teachers' professional learning?
  - d. What have the team members learned about their own professional development by being involved in the project?
3. To what extent has the action learning team been able to transfer knowledge to others in the school community?
  - a. Did the team members convey knowledge/skills/strategies developed from the project to others in the school? How?
  - b. Did other teachers in the school adopt/adapt the team approach? How?
  - c. What has been the influence on student learning in the school?

### Phase 3. Carrying Out the Inquiry

Each inquiry team gathered evidence to address each research question in the context of their action learning and sent it to the academic team member. The academic team member helped teachers to analyse the data and maintained contact with their allocated schools via email or phone to assist at critical points. An interim report was provided to the NSW DET, based on the initial analysis of data.

### Phase 4. Reflection and Action

Each school was visited twice by their academic team member to help teachers focus their inquiry, reflect upon the analysis of the data and tease out any relevant issues. One

question to be considered was whether this form of evaluative inquiry had been a worthwhile process or, more specifically, whether the involvement of teacher teams had built their capabilities to research practice in their own schools. The academic researcher wrote the case study with the help of the teachers (see Appendix 3 for headings). A draft copy of the case was provided to each school to check the interpretations.

## **2.5 Methodology for Each School's Evaluative Inquiry**

Because each school project was different and the evaluative inquiry was intended to suit the particular context, it was expected that the methodologies used in each school would vary. It is clear from the descriptions in Section 3 of this report that schools used a range of methodologies in their evaluative inquiry. This is not surprising, as it reflects the diversity of the school-based teams conducting an evaluative inquiry about their own school-based project. It also demonstrates that the academic team member was prepared to work with the school-based team to devise its own evaluative inquiry.

It should also be noted that in many of the evaluative inquiries, a mixed-mode methodology was used, incorporating a survey in conjunction with follow-up qualitative data gathering. This approach was used at Bonzai Public School, Harbourside Public School, Tea Tree Public School, Outback High School, Hyacinth Public School, Welcome Public School, Valley View High School and Senton High School. In most of these schools a survey was used to ascertain broad views across the school, followed by more in-depth qualitative methods. This diversity of methodologies is a strength of the evaluative inquiry, as it mirrors the range of projects and schools involved.

The data gathering from schools was concluded towards the end of Term 4, 2004. Documentation of the complete case studies is presented in Section 3.

## **2.6 Ethical Conduct**

The key issues that required addressing in the current inquiry were those relating to anonymity of participants and schools, confidentiality, authenticity of data and its security, storage and destruction. The inquiry conformed to the guidelines of the NSW DET Strategic Research Directorate, the Universities of Wollongong and Sydney Human Ethics Committees, and the Australasian Evaluation Society's code of ethical practice.

### **SECTION 3.**

#### **CASE STUDIES**

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# Bonzai Public School

## School Context

Bonzai Public School is a large primary school located in the southern suburbs of Sydney. The school was established in 1984 and currently has 650 students. In 2004 there were 24 classes; one is a Year 1/2 enrichment composite with an enrichment class in each of the grades 3-6. There are 36 staff members, which comprises 1 principal, 6 members of executive, 24 classroom teachers and 7 support staff.

The school website claims that the school boasts a visually pleasant, happy and safe environment with modern, well-resourced, solar-heated buildings and air-conditioned demountables conducive to effective learning and teaching. The principal explained that the school aims for a learning environment encouraging the development of independent students who are self-disciplined, creative thinking and problem solvers. It provides a demanding and inclusive curriculum, ensuring students participate in activities that challenge and meet individual needs and interests. The school has a reputation for academic, cultural and sporting excellence.

## Project Context

The initial action learning project was a joint initiative of Bonzai Public School (coordinating school), Indigo Public School and Apple Public School. In managing the project, a steering committee was established which included the three principals, an executive officer, the academic partner and the area mathematics consultant. The focus of the AGQTP project was on the teaching of numeracy in Stage 2 classrooms, using the new NSW *Mathematics K-6 Syllabus* (Board of Studies, 2002) in connection with the NSW model of pedagogy (Department of Education and Training, 2003). The action learning project focused on providing training and development in these areas with input from an academic partner with expertise in mathematics. While each school worked towards this focus, each school's action learning team was comprised of different personnel, specific to each individual school. This report relates specifically to the action learning team of Bonzai Public School. For this school, there were three distinct phases of the action learning project.

- Phase One: Familiarising each team member with the three dimensions and elements of the NSW model of pedagogy that they could then apply to lesson analysis.
- Phase Two: The analysis of observed numeracy lessons using the coding manual from the NSW 'Classroom Practice Guide'. Particular emphasis was given to lesson programming and classroom teaching practice, focusing specifically on numeracy in Stage 2 classrooms.
- Phase Three: Project team members from across the three schools working with the area mathematics consultant to design units of work and appropriate assessment tasks.

## **Plan for Sustainability**

The action learning process used by this school was regarded by those involved as an effective way to organise professional learning experiences for teachers. Evaluations conducted during and at the end of the action learning experience revealed that there were a number of components that had worked well and were identified as needing to be sustained. The creation of a professional learning community among the three schools with the provision of time for teachers to work together collaboratively was seen to be a positive feature of the project. In addition, the importance of a steering committee (or some type of management structure) to effectively manage action learning projects was seen as necessary to sustain this professional learning community and act as the driver for the action learning process within each of the three sites. Further, the incorporation of quality input to support the professional learning process was seen as another key feature in the plan for sustainability.

## **Method**

For the purposes of the evaluative inquiry a school-based team was created at Bonzai Primary School, comprising three members of the Bonzai Action Learning Team and one classroom teacher who had not previously been involved in the project. This team decided to use the following three phase methodology:

- Phase One: Analysis of data collected by the steering committee throughout the action learning project
- Phase Two: A survey for teachers of the Bonzai Public School action learning team, which involved all of the Stage 2 staff, the executive staff and representatives from the other stages who agreed to join the team (see Attachment 1).
- Phase Three: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principals from the three schools who were involved in this action learning project. One assistant principal from the Bonzai Primary School action learning team and a classroom teacher who joined the evaluative inquiry project interviewed each of the principals individually.

## **Professional Support Needs, Challenges and Consequences of Engaging in Action Learning**

The need for action learning projects to be directly linked to an area of professional necessity for the participants (for example in the initial AGQTP project the focus was on the new Mathematics syllabus as well as the quality teaching framework) is important. The action learning process needs to be responsive to the needs of the participants. In the AGQTP project the majority of participants identified that the professional focus addressed their professional needs. At the time of the evaluative inquiry some discussion had occurred amongst the staff at Bonzai Public School, identifying potential future professional learning foci for action learning experiences.

Members of the initial action learning project emphasized the importance of the participants developing ownership to direct and control the action learning experience according to their professional needs. Throughout the action learning process the participants at the three sites were provided with regular, scheduled opportunities to evaluate, comment upon and contribute to the direction of the professional learning experience. Discussions with the executive officer of the steering committee revealed that

these evaluations helped guide the action learning experience. In order to achieve this responsiveness, regular opportunities for data collection from the participants were scheduled for the participants to evaluate the action learning process and to also assist the steering committee with planning of the future direction of the project. Participants were asked to comment on the process they had engaged with and what they perceived to be the enablers and inhibitors to their professional learning experience.

Evidence collected emphasised the need for time during the action learning process for participants to engage in personal reflection and collaborative discussion. The action learning process required a significant commitment of time from all who were involved. There was strong feeling among the participants that action learning needed to be responsive to and realistic about how much time teachers have within their classrooms to focus on a specific professional learning area. One principal described how action learning projects have to be *meaningful* to the teachers, *relevant* and *related* to professional expectations and what happens in classrooms, and *successful*. This reveals some important characteristics to take into consideration throughout the planning and implementation of an action learning project.

A challenge for the action learning process in this site was how to best organise the action learning experiences for the teachers. Scheduled time was made for input sessions. These sessions were organised in different ways to cater for the different needs of participants. The initial project recognised the importance of teacher reflection and provided time for teachers to engage with this. Such opportunities for reflection provided time for the participants to record what had happened, to document their own professional learning, and to reflect and learn from the action learning process. The inclusion of time that was regular and dedicated to sharing experiences enabled members of the action learning team to work together to build upon and enhance their collective and individual professional learning.

Another challenge identified to support teachers' engagement in action learning was the need for quality input to the action learning process. This could come from an academic partner or from teachers from different schools. To coordinate this input, it is important to clarify the roles of all key parties before embarking on the action learning process.

### **Capacity to Sustain Action Learning**

The participants were able to reflect upon the action learning process after the AGQTP project had officially concluded for the purposes of this evaluative inquiry, and clearly articulate those areas of professional growth that had been captured in the previously collected data. In particular, opportunities to work in groups with other like-minded professionals, time for discussion and planning and time for professional dialogue were seen to be beneficial by the participants. There were strong indications that action learning will continue to shape professional learning experiences both within Bonzai school and across the three schools.

The close geographical positioning of the three schools and the already existing collaborative frameworks were conducive to using action learning as a framework for professional learning experiences. The initial project involved each of the three schools working together using action learning to facilitate a common professional learning experience. During this project procedures were put into place to support this process. The development of a steering committee representative of each of the schools ensured that each school community had a stake in and was informed about the direction of the

action learning process. The three schools have continued to maintain collaborative relationships although no formal project has been put in place since the action learning project concluded.

The inclusion of three schools was a unique feature of this action learning project. While each of the schools was working towards the same project outcomes, there were different organisational features within each site. The impact of school structures and funding were considered to be key considerations within the school sites as to how the action learning teams were constructed. Reflections about the structure of the action learning teams within each of the school sites provided insight into the perceived capacity of each of the teams to sustain and build professional learning and growth. At Bonzai Public School, action learning teams incorporated teachers working within a stage with support of executive personnel. The group structure was considered conducive and supportive of the action learning experience within this school context. Preliminary planning for future action learning projects within the Bonzai school context draw upon this style of grouping.

### **Ways to Share Knowledge with Others**

The results of data collected clearly demonstrated that the action learning experience provided participants with opportunities for professional learning within a learning community. The professional networks both within individual schools and amongst the three schools were identified as a valuable outcome to the action learning experience. Two teachers acknowledged that it was interesting to see other working environments and four teachers identified that it was good to see that other schools experienced the same issues and professional challenges. The provision of frequent opportunities for the three schools to work together appeared to build a professional support network and 'space' for collaboration across the schools.

The action learning experience involving the three schools was consistently reported to the wider community. Conference material has been written and presented by the deputy principal and principal (Bonzai) reporting on the project. In addition, action learning as a professional learning model has been included within Bonzai's 2003 and 2004 annual school reports, communicating the professional learning experience to key stakeholders.

### **Issues**

Organising and providing for action learning experiences across multiple school sites required considerable planning and reflection. A considerable amount of collected and analysed data was made available at the beginning of the evaluative inquiry process. Throughout the initial project regular, scheduled opportunities had been provided for participants to identify those aspects of the professional learning experience that were perceived enablers or inhibitors. Analysis of this data revealed that these periods of collection and analysis provided informed direction for the steering committee throughout the action learning process. The analysis of the data collected enabled the action learning process to be responsive to the collective professional needs of those engaged in the project. Discussions with the evaluative inquiry team identified that the collection and analysis of data was something that the participants and project organizers valued, and would be maintained in future action learning projects.

A key challenge to the action learning process, experienced by the action learning project team, was to include appropriate personnel. The investigation of this action learning

project clearly identified the need for the role of key parties to be carefully defined. It was acknowledged that some description of roles had been provided at the beginning of the project. However, detailed emphasis needed to be given to the practicalities of how to define these roles; in this case, for example, what the specific role of the academic partner might look like throughout the project.

The incorporation of an academic partner within the action learning project was an issue of concern for the majority of participants. The majority of the participants who completed the final survey rated the value of the academic partner as being low in perceived value to the project. The interviews conducted with the three principals supported this and revealed that while the incorporation of an academic partner within the project was an 'excellent concept', it was not an enabler for this project. Criticisms included: '... expected a critical friend but felt he didn't contribute that much'; '... didn't give a lot of ideas just reinforced what was being done'; '... more interested in what he could get out of the project'; and '... was not committed to the project'. In contrast, collected data from interviews with the principals, evaluations from the steering committee and the analysed surveys, both during and at the end of the project, all recognised the importance of having the support of an academic partner with content expertise that was the focus on the project. For example, in this project, the 2002 NSW *Mathematics K-6 Syllabus* was the context for exploring and understanding the NSW Model of Pedagogy. Hence, it would be useful for the action learning team to have an academic partner with expertise in the Key Learning Area of Mathematics to help scaffold the teachers' discussions about their pedagogy.

Each of the members of the evaluative inquiry team indicated that the evaluative inquiry was a worthwhile process. The opportunity to consult with others involved in the project (across the three school sites) provided opportunity for the focus group to review those aspects that acted as enablers and inhibitors throughout the jointly-funded action learning project. One member stated that this opportunity 'showed the value of consulting with people involved in projects to gain an understanding of their perceptions'. Another member commented that the provision of time to do this some time after the project had been completed allowed for a 'critical review'.

The involvement of a new academic team member in the evaluation of the project appeared to be a positive experience for these participants. One focus group member commented that the questions posed by the academic partner throughout this evaluative process 'helped guide my thinking and made me analyse my role in the project'. In addition, having the support of the academic team member to assist in the analysis of the collected data and writing of the report resulted in the task being 'very painless really and an achievable task in a short time'.

## **Conclusion**

The need to build in and plan for sustainability after the AGQTP funding ceased was recognised throughout the action learning experience by teachers at the three schools. It is important to acknowledge that the professional interaction among the three schools had been discussed and planned for prior to the action learning project finishing. At the time of this evaluative inquiry, no new action learning project had been initiated but discussions had been held between the principals to identify possible projects to embark upon. The AGQTP funding provided an avenue, an opportunity and financial support for this to happen. In particular, the collaboration established between the three schools

during the AGQTP project has provided a platform to promote further cross-school interactions.

A number of conditions for sustaining action learning across these schools were revealed throughout the initial action learning project and the subsequent evaluative inquiry. The establishment of a professional learning community, both within each school and among the schools, was consistently identified as a unique feature within the action learning experience and a collaborative structure that needed to be maintained. The careful planning of the steering committee ensured that the action learning process ran smoothly and catered for the needs of those who were participating during the period of funding.

In addition, the importance of regular, prioritised and planned time that is responsive to the needs of the participants is emphasised within this case study. The importance of personnel within the action learning team, particularly with regard to external members working within the project, was also a key consideration for these schools. At the time of the evaluative inquiry, the time constraints and organisational implications of working across the three school contexts had slowed any subsequent action learning experiences. However, action learning was identified as a positive and worthwhile professional learning experience within these school contexts and commitment to future action learning projects was firm.



**What is your preferred format for professional learning?**

(Please rank the following in order of preference – 1 being the most preferred and 5 being the least preferred)

- after-school meetings
- half-day in-school meetings
- full-day in-school meetings
- off-site meetings
- combination

Taking into account each of the strategies used in our AGQTP, what do you consider are the advantages and disadvantages of a project approach to professional learning?

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES

When, as a school, we revisit the Quality Teaching Model as a component of our teacher profession learning, what strategies should we use to further enhance our learning? e.g. more input on the model, more experience in using the coding manual

.....

.....

How did you feel about being involved with the AGQTP?

e.g. burdensome    painful    exciting    having expertise recognized

.....

.....

Since the project formally ended what have you applied to your daily teaching or areas of responsibility?

.....

.....

What do you think we should do next? Where to from here?

.....

.....

Any other comments?

**Thank you for your time.**

# Coast Senior College

## School Context

Coast Secondary College is newly established: its first year of implementation was 2002. Situated on the Central Coast of NSW the Senior Campus caters for students in Years 10,11 and 12. It has an enrolment of around 730 students. The surrounding community is quite diverse in its cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. There is a high unemployment rate and many residents commute to Sydney from the area. The school was unsuccessful in its application for Priority Schools Funding Program status. Nevertheless there is strong evidence that many of the students have a low socioeconomic, 'conservative working class' background. A number of students are the first in their families to stay on at school for Stage 6.

In the words of the principal, Coast has 'a real school-to-work transition focus'. The Senior Campus is currently taking a 'whole-school' approach to improving student outcomes and raising aspirations. There is an explicit focus on developing 'senior literacy' skills and understandings. Analysis of Basic Skills Tests, English Literacy and Language Assessment, Secondary Numeracy Assessment Program, School Certificate (SC) and Higher School Certificate (HSC) results reveals that average student levels of achievement have been poor with low levels of 'value addedness' evident. Throughout 2003 and 2004 the school staff have aimed to address senior literacy needs through a more explicit focus on literacy skills and content in classroom teaching.

## Project Context

The initial *Action learning for school teams* project titled, *Improving Student Outcomes on a Senior Campus through Pedagogy and Literacy*, integrated well with the Campus's strategic plan. It was implemented in Term 4 2003 and Term 1 2004 and involved a team including the principal, deputy, three head teachers and several classroom teachers, drawn from various faculties, along with their academic partner. The team focussed on:

- professional discussion and reflection on teaching and learning and effective strategies that 'work' at executive and faculty meetings
- research and discussion about the NSW DET model of pedagogy in relation to a senior campus with particular emphasis on the intellectual quality dimension
- analysis of literacy requirements and demands in SC and HSC with a view to enhancing students' literacy development
- observation and analysis of lessons (using the NSWDET framework and coding suggestions) and literacy strategies employed by teachers.

Each team member developed a specific project for implementation in their faculty or across the campus. These were shared at executive and staff meetings.

## **Plan for Sustainability**

Engagement in the first AGQTP project led to sharing the outcomes of each faculty project and the planning of a two-day learning conference with ‘hands-on’ practical workshops to replace traditional school development days. This enabled college teachers to discuss teaching practices for two consecutive days (rather than two separate days at the start of Terms 2 and 3). There was a focus on using effective literacy strategies, especially cognitive organisers and scaffolds, in the workshops that were run by project team members.

After the two-day learning conference, executive and staff meetings continued to have a quality teaching focus with an emphasis on intellectual quality (especially the elements of ‘deep understanding’ and ‘engagement’). Each faculty was given the opportunity to develop their own ‘mini-project’ to be funded from professional learning money. Seven projects were initiated in this way.

The mid-year review of faculties and head teachers also focussed on the implementation of quality teaching in learning/teaching programs. There has been an ongoing focus on improving the quality of assessment tasks – teachers discuss all tasks with the principal prior to distribution to students.

## **Method**

The school team for this evaluative inquiry included the deputy principal and two head teachers. In the initial meeting with the university team member it was decided that the sub-questions for each of the main research questions were appropriate and that data gathering would focus on how the projects in Visual Arts, Economics and PDHPE had been sustained. Evidence collected would include:

- analysis of Year 12 results in Visual Arts, Economics and PDHPE over the year, using preliminary, trial and HSC data
- an interview with the principal
- a focus group discussion with the project team members
- a focus group discussion with a group of staff who had not been as directly involved in the project
- discussions with outgoing Year 12 students (see Attachment 1).

In addition, materials (especially cognitive scaffolds to help with structuring essays and other written tasks) developed for use with students would provide valuable data.

## **Professional Support Needs, Challenges, Consequences of Engaging in Action Learning**

The academic team member discussed these issues with the principal during her initial visit and with members of the school project team on two occasions – at the beginning of Term 4 and in Week 12. In summary the project team felt that the action learning focus had provided opportunities for dialogue with colleagues and had been an important driver of change in those faculties that had sustained their focus on explicit teaching of literacy skills. Although the time issue continued to be a challenge, or ‘added burden’, team members felt the project benefits for them had included professional dialogue, team teaching, collaborative stage planning and the development of shared understandings

about quality teaching and learning. The opportunity to undertake this evaluative inquiry had been a positive experience. In their words:

- ‘... it ensured that we continued to refine the projects in our faculties’
- ‘... sharing resources with my colleague in Visual Arts, other faculty head teachers and the deputy principal, has been a positive outcome of the project for me’
- ‘I got much more out of it than I expected.’

All felt it was important to pause to consider the effects and reflect on what had been successful and how this year’s projects could inform the 2005 management plan, including the newly mandated professional learning component.

Feedback with students (discussed in more detail below) indicated that they recognised the helpfulness of the strategies. This in turn had enthused and supported the team members in continuing to develop this approach further.

The two-day learning conference was an effective way of enabling the project team to share their learning with the whole school through practical workshops. The campus learning conference (created by amalgamating two student free days) was an important way of communicating knowledge to others in the school community. The keynote speaker discussed both the quality teaching framework and the action learning process. The project team members each ran workshops with the broader school community to share the knowledge and strategies they had been trialing. Two students also talked about how much they felt the explicit emphasis on structure had benefited them. The conference was felt to be highly successful by the project team and by staff as indicated by the evaluations. This perception was also supported in the focus group discussion with other staff who had not been as involved in the action learning process. They commented that they liked the practical nature of the workshops – and contrasted these with those of a keynote presenter.

Indeed, following the conference, there had been increased interest in the strategies demonstrated through the workshops. A series of ‘mini-projects’ in a number of faculties funded by professional learning money were commenced after this conference.

The action learning project team has continued to work on adapting and modifying literacy strategies to meet the needs of senior students throughout 2004. Staff meetings have focussed on the NSW quality teaching framework for up to 50% of the time. Although seven mini-projects were initiated after this conference, involving about 15 staff, the principal feels that the ‘uptake in other faculties has been slower than I would have liked’.

The ongoing projects in the three identified areas are discussed in more detail below.

### *Visual Arts*

Both the project team member and the other Visual Arts teacher continued with explicit timetabling to separate Art-Making (week A) from Art Theory in the alternative week (week B). They built up an extensive video library to enable students to access information more easily and they refined the scaffolds they had used to help students record data they collected on artists through these videos. An analysis of student writing, comparing early Year 12 essays with later essays, demonstrated clear improvement in understanding of essay structure, more consistent writing throughout the answers, and

improved marks. Students commented that they liked the theory/art-making delineation through week A/week B. After the HSC exam, students commented on how well prepared they had felt, how well they knew the artists, and how much the practice essays had helped. The 2004 HSC results compare very favourably with last year's results with 9 students (out of 19 – nearly 50%) in band 5, 6 in band 4 and 4 in band 3. For 12 students Visual Arts was their highest mark, and for 5, their second highest.

Incoming Year 12 students in Term 4, 2004 now have the benefit of a refined program which begins with a diagnostic higher order task. Both staff members feel that the incoming Year 12 students are already writing in a more sophisticated way. A 'flow-on' effect has also been observed in Art-Making. The action learning process in the Creative Arts Faculty has also been adopted by the Music teacher, and all faculty staff are examining how to adapt the project to look at key terms in Year 10.

### *Economics*

The students received a workbook, which summarised key terms and provided cognitive organisers and scaffolds for essay writing, along with past papers and comments. They were given workshops in breaking down topics and note taking. Students were enthusiastic about the book, used it extensively as a study tool along with the Standards package, and once again commented explicitly about their appreciation of this more structured, step-by-step approach to learning. They also appreciated the class discussions and the way everyone worked together to help each other. Five of the six economics students have shown great improvement over the year and this was also demonstrated in their 2004 HSC results with 4 in band 5 (85+) and two in Band 4. For these 5 students Economics was their best mark, in a number of cases by a large margin.

### *Physical Education*

Many of the students who choose this course love Physical Education but do not initially realise the rigour of the HSC subject. For many, literacy skills are an issue and the faculty team have continued to work with the district literacy consultant over the year to address this. Once again the past HSC papers were analysed for key terms, which were then taught explicitly. After-school and extension classes were offered to students. Despite some serious trauma for students this year (parent serious illness and deaths) HSC results have been very strong. For the first time, this year the school had a student in band 6, 70% were in bands 4–6 and there were no students in band 1.

A similar project for Year 10 has focussed on making learning tasks more explicit and interactive and workshops on higher-order thinking and questioning have been run. The Head Teacher comments: 'I'm still keen to do more. It's been great to have some cross-faculty ideas with the other team members.' Dance will be the next focus in the PDHPE faculty: 'We are taking a subject and a year group at a time and can see there's lots more we want to do.'

### **Capacity to Sustain Action Learning**

The action learning team commented on the positive nature of continuing to meet and the 'cross-faculty fertilization' that was so valuable.

It is clear that the learning conference will be continued as an effective way for staff to sustain the focus on improving student learning. Teacher evaluations of the conference

were very positive, as was the focus group discussion described above. The 'mini-projects' will be an important feature of the campus' professional learning plan for 2005.

In Term 4, 2004 project team members developed a diary for incoming Year 12 students. The diary included information about cognitive organisers and exercises, 'tips' for essay writing, etc. to ensure that use of these strategies was ongoing. The deputy principal, who was not directly involved in the project, commented that this year's students had been using the diary to great advantage. To receive their 2005 diary students had to talk with her about their use of the Term 4, 2004 version.

### **Impact of the project**

The influence on student learning in the school has already been significant as detailed above. This is particularly the case in those faculties where the 'mini-projects' have been ongoing. Some attendance/truancy issues have already been addressed through the explicit focus on literacy skills and content. Students involved in the focus group discussion expressed strong appreciation for the methods used in these three subjects and compared them with how learning was approached in some of their other subjects. Some of their comments included:

'Strategies were stressed – previously I focused on content rather than structure.'  
'These teachers were really enthusiastic and keen for us to do well.'  
'I am more organized now: I will definitely use these skills in the rest of my life.'  
'The teachers cared a lot more and had more in-depth knowledge – their enthusiasm makes you want to do well.'

Students particularly commented on the value of the class discussions, peer marking using the scaffolds, and the variety of teaching strategies used to engage them.

Subsequent SC and HSC results will be important indicators of the sustainability of the 'mini-projects' already in place at Coast Senior Campus.

### **Ways to Share Knowledge with Others**

The campus learning conference provided an important framework for the action learning projects to be shared with others in an explicit and concrete way. The mini-projects have also been shared with other schools in the area through principal meetings, head teacher network meetings and other presentations by project team members.

### **Issues**

Consolidation of understandings around quality teaching continues to occur in most faculties at Coast Secondary College. An understanding of the process of action learning as a professional learning tool seems less developed across those faculties that were less directly involved in mini-projects in 2004. The terminology may be a factor here. As one team member commented: 'Using terms like action learning has been a turn off for some staff. Some head teachers were not as involved or enthusiastic because they didn't understand the process, or were put off by the words.'

There are other staff, however, who feel that the quality teaching framework has affirmed what they are already doing and therefore, there is no need for them to change.

Several staff members expressed the opinion that some faculties were more resistant to change than others: 'In this faculty you feel you are up against a brick wall no matter how hard you try. There are still some people who see it as yet another phase.' While further research would be needed to investigate the accuracy of these perceptions, it is clear that the projects that have been best sustained are those in Visual Arts, PDHPE and Economics. Nevertheless, there is increased interest across the school in applying for professional learning funding for mini quality teaching projects in 2005.

## Conclusions

Development of literacy strategies, using the intellectual quality dimension of the quality teaching framework, has continued since the completion of the *Action learning for school teams* project finished at the end of Term 1, 2004. It has been strongest in those three subject areas that are represented by the evaluative inquiry team members, i.e. Visual Arts, Physical Education and Economics.

While all acknowledge that changing the Coast community culture will take time, preliminary conclusions from an analysis of Year 12 student writing in Visual Arts, Physical Education and Economics suggest that the intervention strategies introduced through the project have:

- (i) resulted in overall higher assessment results
- (ii) compressed the students' results towards the higher end of the scale
- (iii) markedly improved the performance of average and low achieving students
- (iv) refined the performance of higher achieving students in writing.

The results in the 2004 HSC in these three subjects also suggest that the use of cognitive organisers and scaffolds and the explicit teaching of literacy skills have led to improved results. Longitudinal data will enable this trend to be further analysed.

Coast staff as a whole appear less clear about the process of action learning as a professional learning tool, although there is enthusiasm about the use of the quality teaching framework. One teacher feels that the school has made 'an amazing push towards literacy and quality teaching as a whole-school approach.' Another feels that it will take more time to 'change the mindset'.

Conditions that are enabling the sustainability of professional learning for teachers at Coast Secondary Senior College include:

- an ongoing whole-school approach to improving student literacy and outcomes (as evidenced by the Learning Conference, faculty 'mini-projects' and the creation of a senior diary
- professional discussion and reflection on quality teaching and learning dimensions and elements at executive and faculty meetings
- incorporation of professional learning in the school management plan and processes
- allocation of funding to enable time release for faculty planning and execution of mini-projects. These projects were not mandated and faculties were able to define their own anticipated outcomes and time frame.

More positive relationships between student and teachers are an important outcome of the ongoing quality teaching initiatives at Coast Secondary Campus. Students interviewed are

very clear about the value of the explicit teaching strategies that have been introduced and question why all their subjects are not taught in this way.

## **Attachment 1**

### **Focus Questions for Outgoing HSC Students**

- Did you notice any difference in the teaching strategies in different subjects?
- What were the differences?
- Which strategies were most helpful? Why?
- Did you find these skills transferred to other subjects?
- Did you notice any improvement in your results over the year?
- Will you use these skills again?
- What makes a quality teacher?
- Are you more organised as a person in general now?

# Cole Public School

## School Context

Cole Public School is located some 100 kms north of Sydney in the upper valley of the Hunter River. It is a large primary school with 660 students from diverse social backgrounds and at least 40 from indigenous heritage. There is a staff of 24 teachers, the majority of whom have considerable experience in teaching, with less than 5 early career teachers. While the majority of students live in the regional town in which the school is located, many travel to school by bus from the surrounding rural areas.

## Project Context

Cole's action learning project is one that engages the whole school, staff, students and parents and carers. It is a continuation of a professional learning plan that began some 6 years ago. Since that time the school initially used action learning to focus on text types and the effective teaching of these within the wider school literacy program. From 2003 the focus shifted to numeracy and mathematics, and particularly, teaching and learning strategies for mental computation. The focus on mathematics developed from the school's prior engagement with the DET's professional development programs, 'Count Me In' and 'Count Me In Too'. The emphasis on mental problem solving emerged partly because of the requisite for students to articulate their learning in the problem-solving process, a feature that is an important commitment of the principal to the demonstration of successful student learning. It also reflects the success of such problem solving in a Stage 3 clubs program during 2003.

The whole-school professional learning program since 1998 has been an integral component of the school's strategic plan, as it is currently. Mental computation was identified by staff as an important continuing priority for the 2005 school plan. While the project coordinator of the first round of action learning for quality teaching (2003/4) continues to lead the current team, the three team members were not part of the original team. The most recent addition to the current team, leading Stage 2, is a highly experienced senior teacher with a particular interest in mental computation. Her role in stimulating reflection on procedures currently and in the initial quality teaching project is reported as very important. Each member of the current project team works with a team in the action learning project, comprising all teachers in a specific stage.

## Plan for Sustainability

Through the combination of a number of factors, Cole primary school has been able to strongly sustain both action learning and an emphasis on quality teaching during 2004. The focus of the action learning project during Term 4, 2003 and Term 1, 2004 was on the identification of 18 specific strategies for teaching mental computation, based on selected elements (e.g. social support, deep understanding, metalanguage, substantive communication, narrative and cultural knowledge) of the NSW DET quality teaching framework. In addition, all teachers engaged with the quality teaching discussion paper. There was also some trial teaching of some of the strategies, using peer pair teaching and observation. As part of this, explicit links between the strategies and the mathematics syllabus were investigated and strategies were linked to the three dimensions of the NSW DET quality teaching framework. This work was strongly supported by the relationship between the school and their academic partner.

During the remainder of 2004 the focus was on the explicit teaching of the 18 strategies, in cycles of 2 weeks, to all classes. This was to be achieved through a continuation of stage-based peer pairs/teams employing joint planning, classroom observation and reflection. Teacher release to undertake their learning was supplemented with money from the school allocation of professional learning funds and some other internal school arrangements.

## **Method**

Much of the data surrounding the evaluative inquiry were gathered by the academic team member through interviews with the project coordinator and stage team leaders. In turn, their information has resulted from their work with teachers in their teams. However, the most significant evidence for sustaining successful action learning in the context of quality teaching lies in the resources that have been produced collectively by the stage teams and peer pairs. The number and quality of such resources attest unequivocally to the effective learning and work of all teachers in the school. The explicit teaching of the 18 strategies across all classes is evidenced in the 108 units of work produced by the school, 18 for each of Years 1–6. These units reflect the scope and sequence charts developed for numeracy in the school. In addition, an inspection of teachers' programs revealed a strong emphasis, not only on the 18 strategies, but also relevant dimensions of the NSW DET quality teaching framework.

Other evidence of success in sustaining action learning in quality teaching was gathered by the academic team members as part of ongoing research in the school. One focus class in each of Years 3–6 inclusive, was selected. In each focus class three students were identified for consistent observation and in-depth interviewing, related to their learning in mental computation. The focus class teachers met regularly with each other and the academic partner to discuss their findings. Regular reports from this project were made at full staff meetings.

Evidence of the school's capacity to sustain effective action learning also emerged during the time of the evaluative inquiry from the principal's analysis of 2004 BST numeracy results. This indicated improvement in student learning, some of which he suggested may be attributed to the explicit teaching of the strategies that emerged from teachers' collective learning.

## **Professional Support Needs, Challenges and Consequences**

The participation by Cole primary school in the first round of the action learning project provided a strong basis for sustaining action learning and quality teaching, building on the well organised and structured processes of professional development that had been part of the school development plans since 1998. During the first round, learning in stage teams and peer pairs had already been developed and a climate of risk, trust and collegial work encouraged. Strong leadership by both the principal and the project team had also been achieved.

The main support needs to sustain action learning after the end of the first round of quality teaching were identified as creating time and opportunities for peer pairs, stage teams and the project management team to meet and complete their various tasks. Related to this was the need, especially for teachers newly appointed to the school in 2004, to develop the knowledge base in both quality teaching and action learning.

A prerequisite for both of these was the further building of an atmosphere of risk, trust and collegiality that began in the first round of the quality teaching project. The successful meeting of all of these needs and challenges is evident in the professional learning by teachers and the resources that they have produced. It is also evident in the reported level of professional conversations between stage team members, and in the explicit strategies of mental computation, their location within the outcomes of the mathematics syllabus and the inclusion of elements of the quality teaching framework in all teachers' programs, that were recently examined by the principal.

Support to sustain action learning in the implementation of the entire 18 strategies was both internal and external. Very important and creative support is provided by the principal and deputy principal. One day each week, these two people take an entire stage of students for a lesson in personal development. This releases teachers from that stage to meet and work together. In addition, the support of the school's academic partner has continued to be very important.

Other factors supporting the sustaining of action learning have been its integral place in the school's strategic planning cycles and the leadership of the principal who, while not placing undue pressure on staff, gave the strong direction that all staff would participate in the implementation of the strategies. Careful choice of leaders and members of stage teams has also been important. As evidence has emerged of the success of the strategies, the engagement of the students and parents, and the non-threatening manner in which teachers were supported in their learning and work, an increasingly positive climate has been evident in the school, with teachers becoming more willing to risk and trust each other. Part of the reason for this has been the strong emphasis on collegiality in all aspects of the project.

An important element of the success of the project at Cole is the reported absence of 'blockers': while staff are prepared to be critical of ideas and practices they are all willing and prepared to 'give something a go'. Evidence of the success of the teaching of the strategies in classroom processes and student learning has been an increasing factor in the willingness of all teachers to engage in the project. Regular sharing in full staff meetings by all teachers of their experiences in teaching the strategies has also been an important aspect of teachers' professional learning.

Inhibiting factors have been reported as few. Time, particularly during Term 4, has probably been the major challenge because of all of the other demands at this busy time. Thus, there have been fewer teacher presentations at staff meetings during this term. The issue of time has been exacerbated by the difficulty in employing sufficient appropriate relief staff for teacher release.

The knowledge, skills and strategies developed during the teachers' action learning cycles have also been explicitly shared with parents. For each two-week cycle, a simple and concise user-friendly 'What's On' newsletter was produced by the project team for parents. This newsletter identified the specific strategy for the next two weeks, provided an example of the strategy, described what to observe when a student was using the strategy, and detailed how students in each class would be working on the strategy over the two weeks. As a result of the newsletter, there were reports of parents observing their children using the strategy at home and parents deliberately relating problems at home to the relevant strategy. Further, a number of parents volunteered to work with students at school in facilitating their learning of the strategy.

## **Capacity to Sustain Action Learning**

There are a number of important factors that facilitated Cole school in sustaining action learning, including a whole-school focus on collective learning by students, teachers and parents/carers as members of a professional learning community. This whole-school focus and commitment is strongly reflected in the school's development plans from 1998 onwards and in the commitment of principal and executive to create and support opportunity for teachers to learn and work together. The necessary skills for action learning and the attitudes of risk, trust and collegiality have also been strongly constructed within stage teams and across the school. There is also a strong commitment by teachers to share their experiences and learning with other staff in staff meetings, and with parents on other occasions. The basis for the continuing application of action learning as a major form of teacher professional development in the school has been strongly established. Not least important is the willingness of teachers to become engaged in action learning. The impact of their work is demonstrated in the learning of their students.

## **Ways to Share Knowledge with Others**

There have been a number of strategies used to share the knowledge gained from the action learning by different groups in the school. First, members of the project team have regularly provided reports to full staff meetings, while individual members have worked with their stage teams. Peer pairs and teams have also shared their learning and experiences with their stage colleagues, and with all staff in full staff meetings. The most tangible evidence of this sharing are the 108 units of work developed around the 18 student learning strategies. The staff have also directly shared their learning with parents and community members through the fortnightly newsletters. There are plans to share teachers' work and learning processes with other schools in the district, and there is also a possibility that the units of work may be published.

## **Issues**

Members of the current project management team reported that they felt that engaging in the evaluative inquiry had been a worthwhile and productive process. Having to gather evidence of the efficacy and impact of the project from stage teams and leaders, meant that the current project coordinator and the project team had to reflect critically on the project and its processes and outcomes. As a result of the data gathering and evaluation by teachers, the school was able to clarify its priorities and focus for 2005 and plan how to build on the work in quality teaching achieved so far, using action learning processes. For example, there is now a much more developed understanding of the link between the previous work on oral literacy and the articulation of processes in mental computation and problem solving.

While a further important realisation has been the long-term nature of any effective curriculum, pedagogical or organisational change, the participation in the evaluative inquiry has provided the school with the opportunity to complete their initial plans. In turn, this has permitted staff to be able to see concrete examples of successful change which they have generated, owned and implemented. This has been an important impetus to staff expressing the desire to continue working with both wider applications of quality teaching and processes of action learning.

Participation in the evaluative inquiry has also provided further opportunities for the project coordinator and team members to develop leadership skills and experience and thus build the capacity of the school in this regard. A number of team members report a renewed invigoration in their teaching and professional learning as a result of their participation in the project.

The requirement to gather data and work with the external investigator has reportedly increased the capabilities of all staff to different degrees. There was a deal of discussion in the project team as to the types of information necessary to respond to the questions of the evaluative inquiry. The meetings between stage team leaders and their teacher teams to respond to the inquiry questions have provided opportunities for further focused reflection on their learning in the project, and professional conversations about quality teaching and professional learning. As part of preparing for such discussions, teachers have engaged in focused observation and interviewing of selected students about their learning. One result of these processes has been the recognition that teachers in the school need to investigate how they might record student learning outcomes dealing with mental computation. The project coordinator reports that she has had to further develop her skills in both oral and written reporting of the results of data gathering for the evaluative inquiry.

## **Conclusion**

The principal, project coordinator and project team members identified a number of conditions which they regard as necessary to sustain professional learning in schools. These conditions are clearly reflected in their experience of action learning described above. All of these are interrelated and necessary. First, is strong, supportive and collegial leadership by both the principal and executive of the school, and by the project coordinator and team. Such leadership and collegial decision making should also be reflected in both the major planning and development documents of the school and in its organisational structure.

Second, and equally important, is a school culture that encourages collegial learning in an atmosphere of mutual trust, respect and risk: a professional learning community that is mutually supportive in the critical investigation of its own practice, and committed to teaching as a learning profession.

Third, is that teachers have the knowledge and skills for, and the, preferably successful, experience of action learning or some other powerful strategies for professional development. While such knowledge, skills and experience are very important, it is the strong belief of the principal and project coordinator that even with this, funding additional to school professional learning funds is essential for teacher release to support professional learning. In the case of Cole, to be able to sustain the level of whole-school learning that has so far occurred, an amount equal to the current allocation of professional learning funds would be required. While it may be possible to sustain professional learning, using an action learning model, for part of the staff within the allocated professional learning money, this would prevent the continuation of whole-school learning and learning by all staff together, that has been one of the strongest features of the work at Cole, and one of the most important elements in its success.

From the evidence available during the evaluative inquiry, there is no doubt that Cole has been able to sustain and extend the impetus and processes of action learning for quality teaching begun in the first round of the project. As a result of the project, teachers have

gained greater knowledge of the NSW quality teaching model, as well as its application within the context of the mathematics syllabus to programming, teaching and learning in mental computation. Teachers have also increased their application of observation as a means of enhancing their understanding of student learning. Students have increased their abilities in a range of specifically focused learning strategies, and in their ability to articulate their learning to both teachers and parents. Overall, there has been increased enthusiasm, excitement and interest in mathematics and problem solving across the school and within the community. More importantly, there has developed an increasing capacity within the school to employ action learning as an effective model for future professional learning by all current staff.

# Daisy Public School

## School Context

Daisy Public School is a Country Areas Program (CAP) primary school with 200 students and 9 classroom teachers. The students come from predominantly middle class backgrounds, with a wide range of family groupings. The school population is very stable. Prior to the project, CAP funding enabled the school to engage in a range of professional development activities, that included DeBono's six thinking hats, Gardner's multiple intelligences and Bloom's Taxonomy. In 2003 these models were used to develop HSIE and literature units of work.

## Project Context

The initial project began in Term 3, 2003 and involved all teachers (three being the team leaders) at the school, working with an academic partner over two and a half days to gain awareness of the NSW model of pedagogy. The first day involved two project leaders at the school being observed and coded (according to elements in the model) while teaching their classes. Teachers met for another half day to reflect on the process and review the model. Posters using more accessible language were suggested for display in classrooms to act as prompts for quality teaching. The final day was used to prepare literacy units of work, based on the model.

Over 2004, further teacher release was made available for professional development, using the model. This included the use of consultants and the production of affinity diagrams to plan future teaching and opportunity for teachers to consider ways of gathering evidence about teaching. Teachers collectively developed a vision statement for the school and revised student exit outcomes and values in line with the elements of the NSW quality teaching framework.

## Plan for Sustainability

It was the intention of the teacher team to continue the project through a number of activities that included:

- planning of units across grades and stages
- continuing the action learning process to plan, reflect and improve pedagogy
- sharing ideas, strategies and units of work that reflected the NSW model of pedagogy
- evaluating the impact of the model on student learning
- prioritising aspects of the model.

## Method

The team leaders agreed to use a survey methodology for the evaluative enquiry. A questionnaire was drafted at the first meeting between the three team leaders and the academic partner (see Attachment 1). The questionnaire was further refined and distributed for comment and modification at a subsequent staff meeting, where all teaching staff had input. The questionnaire was completed by each teacher at the next staff meeting. During this time, the team leaders discussed and responded to individual concerns. This dialogue was noted by each team leader.

In addition, documentary evidence was provided by the team leaders to indicate sharing of knowledge with the wider educational community.

### **Professional Support Needs, Challenges and Consequences of Engaging in Action Learning**

The results of the survey indicated that the teachers generally found the action learning process helpful in supporting their professional learning needs. The involvement of an academic partner in the process was seen as beneficial, and there was overwhelming support for the use of a team approach. The process of coding, in order to gain a shared understanding of the model, was generally viewed favourably, with one teacher commenting: 'Coding enabled me to develop greater understanding of the elements of the model and gave examples of what it looked like in the video.'

Teachers encountered a number of challenges with the project. Not unexpectedly, finding enough time was a challenge for many. The content of the project presented problems with communication and developing a shared understanding of the NSW model of pedagogy. As one teacher commented, '... initially coming to terms with terminology and what everything meant.' Linking subsequent activities with the model and the process of action learning was not accepted by all teachers, with one commenting: 'As a matter of course I think things such as exit outcomes would have been reviewed. I don't think that resulted from QTP terminology and coding.'

The process of action learning itself may not have been apparent to teachers. One team leader identified the difficulty of 'communication with other staff members about each stage. Seeing this project as an action learning process rather than a project'. The lack of understanding of the process led to one teacher's frustration. She reported: 'Waters have been muddled. Not clear about exactly how things have changed. Some short term change. So many things happening.'

Beside these challenges all teachers indicated that the project was helpful in developing their awareness of the NSW model of pedagogy, planning for future teaching, implementing appropriate teaching strategies and reflecting on practice. This was summed up by one teacher thus: 'Helped many ways – understanding model/each other. Reflective practice. Broke down barriers and developed a sense of respect for colleagues. Understand and further develop good/better teaching practice.'

However, there was ambivalence in terms of the project developing a supportive school climate, with some teachers indicating a lack of communication and undue pressure to be part of the project. For example, a teacher commented: 'Sometimes some staff did not know what was going on. Initial submission – didn't get to read through it, unaware of project so when we were asked if we wanted to join we didn't have enough background. Pressure to join. Need communication about what people are doing.'

## **Capacity to Sustain Action Learning**

Throughout 2004 the team engaged in a number of activities involving unit planning, creating a vision statement and exit outcomes, and programming. Generally, teachers saw the connection between these activities and the initial QT activity. One teacher commented that ‘understanding the elements definitely aids in all these areas as it’s the focus around which work revolves for all members of the school community’.

When asked how the action learning process could be continued to help them implement the pedagogy model in their classrooms, many teachers commented on the need for a continuing process enabling planning, sharing and reflection, summed up by one teacher: ‘Planning time – any time that allows you to work with a team. Outside professional help. Time for reflection. Time to reflect on units.’

Teachers listed a range of activities they saw as a continuation of the project: school plan, scope and sequencing, exit outcomes, values, boys education; with one teacher commenting that ‘everything we do is a part of the process of action learning.’

The 2005 school management plan has listed quality teaching, learning and improvement as a focus area. The processes of action learning are clearly evident in the document, which indicates a need for team mentoring, planning, reflection and sharing.

## **Impact of the Project**

Teachers overwhelmingly indicated that the project was helpful in terms of their own professional learning, with one teacher describing the process thus: ‘... a very steep learning curve that has me thinking about teaching for the first time in my career. I’m sure I’m a better teacher because of it. I’ve become more passionate about teaching and I’m willing to take more risks.’ However, the process of action learning may not have been apparent to some teachers: ‘... it was only in hindsight that I realised that this project involved ongoing action learning, not just the pedagogy model, which was the initial understanding.’

When asked what impact has your involvement in the action learning process had on improving your teaching, teachers highlighted the increased focus on planning, reflection and communication, with the added benefit of confirming teachers’ beliefs and practices. One teacher stated: ‘Really made me take a look at my methodology and measure what I was doing against the model. Gave me guidelines of what had to be changed/looked at when planning. Planning now revolves around ensuring many of the elements are included. Reassured me that I am a good teacher.’

## **Ways to Share Knowledge with Others**

It was not evident to many teachers that the project had an impact on student learning. However, there are indications that teachers’ perceptions, and perhaps practices, are changing and that these will in time have an impact on student outcomes. As one teacher explained:

I think more about the way I involve students in the learning process. I value their opinions and input. I think this has resulted in a deeper understanding about why they do things, if not necessarily improved outcomes. I need to be more systematic in the way in which I evaluate

students and in record keeping. I need to programme more carefully, referring to the model, in order to develop my understanding of it. It is still not an integral part of my everyday thinking in terms of what I do in the classroom.

When asked how they had shared their professional knowledge of the project/ongoing use and implementation of the NSW model of pedagogy within the school community, e.g. with other teachers, responses indicated a broad range of networking. These included parent meetings, informal school discussions, and workshops at conferences held by professional associations and the DET.

Documentary evidence indicated that the team leaders, in particular, were especially productive in sharing their professional knowledge of the project with the wider community through CAP workshops, DET pedagogy conferences in Newcastle and Wollongong, principals' conferences, and conferences held by professional associations.

### **Issues**

The three team leaders are highly professional, and strongly committed to improving teaching and learning in their school. On reflection, however, they indicated that the project should have progressed more slowly and some activities, such as coding each other's teaching, may have produced unnecessary anxieties for some teachers. They were aware that not all teachers in the school were convinced that the model applies to all children.

The team leaders expressed the view that the focus of the original project and the DET discourse surrounding it was to gain a shared understanding and the ability to implement the model. The focus was not 'action learning' per se. This has led some teachers at the school to question the purpose of the evaluation.

The team leaders expressed the view that the evaluative enquiry had been a useful exercise that provided time to reflect and share thoughts on the project and its achievements. They expressed the view that through this process they have gained a greater awareness of the feelings and needs of other staff members, and a greater understanding of the process of action learning and its potential for future school projects. Through involvement in this process the team leaders appear more confident to use research and evaluation techniques as part of an overall school improvement process.

### **Conclusion**

Being a small school, all 8–10 teaching staff expressed a desire to be part of the action learning team. No one felt excluded by the process. While this was an important factor to consider, it was apparent that the motivation of the core team of three teachers provided the impetus to project sustainability. Not surprisingly, the same motivation was not shared equally by all staff.

While many of the ongoing activities were related to the project, this may not have been apparent to all staff, hence the need for ongoing communication. Many of the ongoing activities were related to whole-school concerns, such as vision statements and exit outcomes, where the action learning team continues to play a significant role. The use of action learning teams for engaging in more confined projects, for example, related to subject/stage concerns, has yet to be realised at the school.

A dual emphasis on the nature of the project, in this case quality teaching, and the process by which it can be achieved, that is, action learning, may be necessary to sustain teachers' professional development through action learning.

**Attachment 1**

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# Action Learning Survey (AGQTP)

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This survey wants to find out what impact the action learning project (AGQTP) has had on your Professional Development and it is a draft breakdown of the following questions:

1. What are the professional support needs, challenges and consequences for teachers who engage in action learning?
2. What is the capacity of the school and the individual action learning team members to sustain and build professional learning and growth after the *Action learning for school teams* project was completed?
3. To what extent has the action learning team been able to transfer knowledge to others in the school community?

**A. How helpful did you find ...?**



**Helpful**

**Unhelpful**

1.	The Action Learning project			
2.	Academic support			
3.	Coding: using the video to come to a shared understanding of the model			
4.	Coding: observation/reflection within the classroom			
5.	Team work			

**Comments:**

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**B. What benefits did you experience with the project?**

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**C. What difficulty, if any, did you experience with the project?**

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**D. How did the project help...?**



**Helpful**

**Unhelpful**

1.	Develop awareness of the NSW Pedagogy Model			
2.	Plan your teaching			
3.	Implement the Model			
4.	Reflect on your own practice			
5.	Develop a supportive school climate			

**Comments:**

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**E. How related are these activities to the project?**



**Relevant**

**Less relevant**

1.	Unit planning			
2.	Vision statement			
3.	Exit outcomes			
4.	Programming			

**Comments:**

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**F. How could the action learning process be continued to help you implement the Pedagogy Model in your classroom?**

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**G. What other activities are you involved in, that you see are a continuation of the project?**

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**H. In terms of your professional learning:**



Helpful

Unhelpful

1.	How helpful has your involvement in the Action Learning Project been?			
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**Comments:**

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**I. What impact has your involvement in the action learning process had on improving your teaching?**

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**J. What impact has your involvement in the action learning process had on improving student learning outcomes?**

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**K. How have you shared your professional knowledge of the project/ongoing use and implementation of the Pedagogy Model within the school community eg. other teachers?**

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**L. How have you shared your professional knowledge of the project with the wider community?**

(Parents/students/professional associations/conferences – for which we need to provide transcripts/copies of presentations/newsletters)

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**Thank you for completing this questionnaire.**

# Harbourside Public School

## School Context

Harbourside Public School is a P2 primary school and has a population of around 540 primary students, drawn from a very wide range of Sydney suburbs because of its proximity to the city. The school community is quite diverse in its cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, with approximately 52% of the school population coming from Non English Speaking Backgrounds.

The school employs twenty teaching staff and approximately ten more staff members making up support (English as a Second Language, Indonesian, Learning Support teachers, Reading Recovery) and ancillary staff. Harbourside has a highly transient teaching staff. There are approximately five early career teachers at any given time. In 2004 the school developed a comprehensive induction and mentoring program.

For many years the school has had an ongoing professional partnership with a university. This partnership provides support for the university's teacher preservice and postgraduate education programs. The link to the university ensures access to the latest research in educational methodology and theory, and this supports the school's dedication to best practice. Technology is a major current focus.

## Project Context

The initial *Action learning for school teams* project in Term 4, 2003 and Term 1, 2004 involved a team of teachers drawn from stages one, two and three, the librarian and the ICT coordinator. In 2003 the school had been networked so teachers identified a need to increase their understanding of how ICT could be used to achieve deep learning by:

- identifying how children's engagement in learning is influenced by e-learning strategies
- expanding their pedagogical repertoire in the use of ICT in the classroom
- identifying strategies to facilitate a flexible learning environment in the classroom
- reflecting on their own practice and journey of learning through the development of an electronic learning portfolio, sharing their practice through electronic journals on the intranet website, and developing online resources.

The project engaged both staff and students in deep learning in flexible learning environments. Teachers involved reported an increased understanding of pedagogy, using the NSW quality teaching framework (NSWDET, 2003) and ICT in literacy.

## Plan for Sustainability

Engagement in this first AGQTP project led to sharing the outcomes and engaging in further planning on the Term 3, 2004 school development day. Plans were developed to broaden staff and student learning about quality teaching through whole-school involvement in an action learning project in Term 3, 2004.

The aim of the second action learning project was to develop and implement authentic learning programs in mathematics, aligned with the NSW quality teaching framework. The project team for this second project thus involved the whole staff. Each stage team

was led by a member of the school executive and was given release time for planning. With the support of a district mathematics consultant, stage teams decided upon a topic, developed a unit of work and implemented it over a 3–4 week period.

## **Method**

The school team for this evaluative inquiry included the principal, two assistant principals (APs) and an early career teacher. In the initial meeting with the academic partner it was decided that the sub-questions and each of the main research questions developed for the evaluative inquiry were appropriate, and that evidence would be collected through:

- discussion with the project team
- an open-ended staff survey for all staff (see Attachment 1), undertaken during a regular staff meeting. The aim of the survey was to establish how successful staff felt the action learning project had been in accomplishing its goal, which was to design a quality mathematics assessment task, using the NSW quality teaching framework. Teachers were provided with the context for the survey, together with some refreshments. They were given ten minutes to complete the questionnaire. Eighteen of a possible twenty-five responses were handed in at the end of the staff meeting (i.e. 72% response rate). Responses for each question were analysed and grouped thematically, and are discussed below
- a focus group discussion with the executive team, facilitated by one of the APs on the evaluative inquiry team. It was expected that this discussion would probe findings from the survey
- units and other artifacts (rubric, coding sheet) generated during the project.

## **Professional Support Needs, Challenges and Consequences of Engaging in Action Learning**

A large number of benefits, arising from their participation in action learning, were listed by survey respondents and these have been broadly grouped according to frequency of content.

Ten respondents (55%) cited ‘ideas from other teachers’ and ‘professional discussion’ or ‘dialogue’ as major benefits of the project. Similarly, ten also discussed the opportunity to collaborate, cooperate or work as a team. These comments reflect teachers’ recognition of the value of a collaborative action learning process as a professional learning tool.

Teachers were almost evenly split in their response to the survey question about the consequences of their involvement in the project on their classroom practice. Nine respondents (50%) felt that their involvement in this process had affected their classroom practice and several cited multiple changes. The changes included:

- more aware of what and how I teach (4)
- more focussed on assessment for learning (3)
- more hands on (1)
- now use learning journals (1)
- more focus on ‘big’ concepts as outcomes for assessment and developing appropriate activities (1)
- more variety in teaching (1)
- more use of groups of two in some activities (1)
- finding different ways of learning (1)

- quality teaching elements incorporated (1)
- more thoughtful about my use of language (1)
- good ideas for building up the field before the assessment task (1)
- more explicit teaching (1)
- more use of outside activities (1).

The teachers who did not think the project had affected their classroom practice were spread evenly across the four stage teams. Of the eight respondents (44.4%) who did not feel there were any changes to their classroom practice, one felt he/she now had more background knowledge about 'mass', one respondent felt that there would be a change when he/she was back on class and one person did not provide a specific response to this question.

In the focus group discussion with the executive team, there was also strong support for the above survey findings. All discussants felt project benefits had included professional dialogue, team teaching, collaborative stage planning and the development of shared understandings about both the teaching of mathematics and the quality teaching framework. The executive also endorsed the action learning process as more effective as a professional learning tool than other PD models.

There was less agreement in the survey findings regarding the challenges of engaging in action learning. Seven participants (38%) mentioned time. For two of these, more time was needed to gain a shared understanding and consensus across a stage team that had varying levels of experience, while another commented that more time for reflection and analysis of student achievement was needed. Four teachers stated that initially the sharing of resources was a challenge. Three staff members in Stage Two felt they had needed more information before the project began and one that a clearer link between action learning and quality teaching needed to be established.

Some of the other challenges mentioned were more logistical and related to specific stage projects (e.g. 'rotating classes for cooking' (Stage Three classes), 'tracking own class' performance', 'finding the right level of activities', 'logistics'). Three staff members felt that not being on their own class was an inhibiting factor. Interestingly, one respondent mentioned 'blockers' within the stage team but, unfortunately, did not elaborate further.

Seven teachers (38.8%) provided examples of how they felt action learning had deepened their understanding of the quality teaching framework. These included:

- a deeper understanding of coding assessment tasks and units (2)
- better understanding of different areas, e.g. significant learning environment, deep understanding (3)
- an authentic opportunity to apply the concepts
- addressing questions of relevance, metalanguage.

On the other hand, three teachers commented that they did feel there had been enough time to discuss this as a team and three that there had been no linking of the two. Four responded that more time for reflection and/or discussion of the quality teaching framework would have been beneficial. One respondent did not feel the district mathematics consultant had provided much help. Another suggested a mid-unit assessment task. One respondent felt that the team was 'already doing it' before the introduction of the action learning project.

## Capacity to Sustain Action Learning

In the survey, twelve respondents supported the statement that action learning is a valuable professional learning tool for teachers. As described above, the whole staff was involved in the second phase of the action learning project from Term 3, 2004 onwards. All staff were involved in the professional development on the Term 3 pupil-free day, where findings from the phase 1 project were shared. The whole staff then moved to stage teams to undertake a mathematics project, involving the action learning process. The goal of the action learning project was to design a quality maths assessment task using the NSW quality teaching framework.

Suggestions listed for the sustainability of action learning beyond 2004 included:

- a project in stage teams each Term (3)
- continued team/collaborative planning (4)
- more time (2)
- more training for stage leaders (2)
- extension to other KLAs/outcomes (2)
- continued following of framework in planning – use of proforma

One respondent was not sure, one felt the process was not useful, one felt the quality teaching framework had not been discussed sufficiently, and three left this question blank. One teacher felt that a great deal of time had been spent on one small part of the curriculum.

The executive team also acknowledged that each stage team needed to plan the action learning process carefully for it to be successful, and recommended that other projects be put on hold when this kind of project was being undertaken. There needed to be some form of whole-school debriefing on a regular basis, and also at the end of the project, to discuss what had been learned and achieved and plan future directions.

## Impact of the Project

One of the survey questions asked about the future implications for sustaining this planning process, and how it would impact on students' learning. The following suggestions were made:

- better sequencing
- more meaningful student learning
- more collaboration on assessment tasks
- continue to share and plan as a team
- ongoing integration of QTF
- goals more outcome driven
- backward planning
- better individualisation
- *We need to keep adding to what we have learnt*
- more focus.

Fourteen teachers who responded to the survey saw direct links between their professional learning and their students' learning (77.7%). Once again, they provided a range of reasons for their responses. These included:

- ‘New ideas and better ways to do things increase teacher confidence and this will always benefit the students.’ (2)
- ‘Some children showed remarkable improvements due to the additional support in the classroom.’
- ‘If I’m interested in my learning the students will be interested in theirs.’ (5)
- ‘... clearer, more explicit steps to lessons’
- ‘... plays off each other’
- ‘Students are better able to articulate what they have learned – deep knowledge and metalanguage.’ (2)
- ‘... great dialogue with students that created deeper understanding and use of correct mathematical language’(2)
- ‘My growth is their growth.’
- ‘When I learn, I implement in my practice.’ (2)

Two staff did not respond to this question: one commented ‘not yet’, and the other was not on class so did not comment.

### **Ways to Share Knowledge with Others**

The original action learning team shared their understandings through school development days. Stage team leaders also used their knowledge to facilitate the action learning process in their stage teams. Parents have been kept well informed at all stages of the projects. In addition, team members have presented at a range of conferences during 2004.

Further insights into perceptions of sharing knowledge gained emerged from responses to the survey. In relation to the question, *How did the planning process of action learning differ from your general stage and/or individual planning*, six respondents (one third) noted that the action learning process had enabled increased collaboration, and five commented that the process allowed for more discussion in general or more time to discuss children’s learning and enable the development of shared meanings. Three staff felt that new ideas had emerged from the group process. Two responses discussed ‘depth of learning’, while two cited the focus on assessment to develop learning activities as a change. A further two staff members felt this process had provided them with more support.

### **Issues**

Despite the difficulties of the time frame, all members of the project team felt it had been worthwhile to engage in the evaluative inquiry because it allowed them to reflect on the value of the whole-school action learning project in Term 3, 2004. They commented that both the survey and the focus group discussions provided valuable insights that would be used for 2005 professional learning planning. The evaluative inquiry team expressed the view that they had been supported in their development and analysis of the survey questions and in framing follow-up questions for the focus group discussion. The funding over such a short time frame, however, meant that this increased research confidence could not be fully explored.

A number of class teachers and executive staff felt that the link between action learning as a process and the quality teaching framework needed to be further developed in the future.

When the next project is undertaken, the executive team were emphatic that more professional learning would initially be needed for the stage team leaders. There would also need to be more in-depth sessions on the quality teaching framework, and more reflection time at its conclusion. It was felt that a number of staff to date had developed a fairly superficial understanding of the NSW model of pedagogy.

## **Conclusions**

There was much support for both the action learning process used during this project and the continuation of the investigation of the NSW model of pedagogy. It is clear that the momentum to use action learning as a professional learning tool to explore quality teaching has been sustained at Harbourside. This is because the action learning process is embedded within a strong professional learning culture. Many of the teachers recognised the value of collaborative planning and professional dialogue and the positive impact of their professional learning on student learning.

There were suggestions that, next year, another curriculum area could be chosen with an emphasis on examining what quality teaching means in this KLA. It was stressed that this needed to be undertaken carefully and with in-depth support. The process of action learning should continue to be explored as a professional learning tool and the links between the use of action learning and the quality teaching framework could be further developed in this subsequent project. It may be useful to explore how RFF and support teaching staff could be supported to enable them to feel more part of such whole-staff projects.

**Attachment 1**

*Harbourside Action Learning Survey*

Date:

Stage:

1. *What were the benefits gained from participating in the Action Learning project?*

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2. *What challenges or factors, if any, inhibited your participation in the Action Learning project?*

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3. *How did the planning process of action learning differ from your general stage and/or individual programming?*

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4. *How has your participation in this project affected your classroom practice?*

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5. *What links do you see between your professional learning and your students' learning?*

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6. *What is your understanding of the difference between assessment of learning and assessment for learning?*

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7. Give details of how the Action Learning project deepened your understanding of the Quality Teaching Framework?

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8. The goal of the Action Learning project was to design a quality maths assessment task using the Quality Teaching Framework. Give details of how your team has accomplished this?

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9. If you don't feel your team succeeded in this goal, what further support structures would have assisted your team in meeting this goal?

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10. What ideas do you have to sustain the process of Action Learning in your/all stage team/s in coming years?

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11. What are the future implications of this planning process on us as professional learners and the students in our care?

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*Thank for your time and cooperation.*

*J,A &,A  
Evaluation Team for the Sustainability of Professional Learning  
through Action Learning*

# Hyacinth Public School

## School Context

Hyacinth Public School has 270 pupils and 14 staff. The school is a major focus for the small village on the outskirts of Sydney. It is surrounded by bushland and is somewhat isolated. Visitors comment on its peaceful and welcoming atmosphere and how it appears obvious that students are happy to be there. Staff members are very experienced and are both friendly and enthusiastic, with a strong social bond evident in the staffroom. The school has a tradition of cooperative learning that has been built upon by the principal, who has been at Hyacinth for three years. He takes an active, supportive and 'hands on' approach to leadership. There are excellent opportunities for staff development and team learning. There is dialogue about effective teaching and learning practices. The new buildings, opened last year, provided an opportunity to upgrade the school's access to technology. This is evidenced by the pupils' growing confidence with web page building, use of the Internet and application of the digital and video cameras.

## Project Context

The initial project involved investigating and improving teaching practice through an action learning approach, utilising the NSW model of pedagogy, with specific attention to science, literacy and boys' education. The team of six formed three pairs and each teacher worked with a 'buddy' to examine and implement specific approaches, elements and dimensions to develop strategies and to improve classroom practice in the area of science. This included pairs meeting together to share and discuss, viewing each others' class/lessons, videoing lessons, coding lessons, and sharing information and results in team meetings and meetings with their academic partner. The team presented at a conference in January 2004 and was invited to present at a sharing conference in April 2004. Consultants were also invited to the school. They addressed full staff meetings and all staff were involved in this aspect. The school was also selected as a case study, which was included in the *Teachers as Learners* Evaluation Report of the AGQTP 2003–04 activity, *Action learning for school teams*.

## Plan for Sustainability

Beginning in Term 2, 2004, the exploration of ways to implement aspects of the NSW model of pedagogy expanded to include the whole staff, commencing with an information day (Staff Development Day) in Term 2. General information was made available and opportunities to question and discuss were provided for all staff through casual conversation and shared luncheons and afternoon teas.

It was decided at the beginning of Term 2 to use the original action learning team members as leaders of five new teams in the school, so that each new team had an original team project member. It was intended to spend the staff meeting every second week in the action learning teams, focusing on elements of the quality teaching framework, and to have additional relief time where appropriate. This process was documented in the school's management plan.

## Method

The school-based inquiry team decided to use the following three-phase methodology for the evaluative inquiry:

- Phase 1 An individual survey was designed to target the original action learning team. One section of the survey contained questions for the whole staff (see Attachment 1).
- Phase 2 At the beginning of Term 2 in 2004, the school established five mini-action-learning teams. It was decided that each of the mini-action-learning teams would meet to discuss their own survey results. The main responses of the group discussions were collated on a project sheet.
- Phase 3 The school inquiry team collected all the projects sheets and individual surveys, collated the data, and analysed it for this report.

## Professional Support Needs, Challenges and Consequences of Engaging in Action Learning

The results of the survey from the original action learning team indicate that the key *needs* for action learning to work in the school were personal relevance, collegial school culture, academic support, personal reflection, team discussions, time release and collegial support (Ewing et al., 2004). Responses to the open-ended questions on the survey confirmed these needs, as well as assistance from an academic partner, as valuable: 'I really valued the reality check of an academic partner from outside helping with perspective and keeping it manageable.' There were also some positive comments made concerning personal relevance; for example: '... personal learning appropriate for my needs.' In particular, the project itself gave the school a focus: '... it gave us a scaffold and a support network' and an important aspect was having time, '... having the time to stop, think and reflect was a wonderful experience'. All this was in the context of collegial support: 'Collegial support is a part of our school culture.'

The *challenges* or difficulties teachers identified in participating in action learning were the time frame of the project, over Term 4, 2003 and Term 1, 2004, and the amount of time required for videoing lessons, which was not seen to be as useful as observation and discussion. Responses to the open-ended questions confirmed these factors: 'Doing action learning in Term 4 is difficult when so many other things were happening' as well as a lack of some physical resources for initiatives: '... resources to do the activities I had planned.'

The survey also identified *consequences* for teachers who participated in action learning. These included enabling self-direction of professional learning and 'sharing ideas, seeing growth in confidence and development in teacher skills and knowledge'. One teacher stated that it was 'refreshing, learning together, sharing, changing ideas and teaching techniques': 'I like to choose my own goals and pursue my own journey ... the opportunity to redefine my path to match my needs.' It was necessary to have school support: 'Opportunities for two teachers to critically review my teaching made me focus on weak areas according to elements' and personal input was important: 'The more one puts into action learning, the more one gains.'

It was rewarding that teachers noticed improvement in their classroom practice and some 'have discovered some exciting new approaches': 'Kids love the lessons, there are fewer behavioural issues and ... they learned a lot about science and are more confident.'

### **Capacity to Sustain Action Learning**

The results of the survey from the original action learning team identified that the key factors, which were the most helpful in sustaining the action learning at the end of Term 1 2004, were team sharing, personal reflection/goal setting, creating/re-forming action learning sub-teams, team planning, team meetings, and identification/discussion of elements/dimensions.

Responses to the open-ended question confirmed these key factors as important for sustaining action learning: 'Working in our teams is a great way to develop staff as it provides 100% engagement' which is assisted by a supportive school culture: 'We are very fortunate that our school climate (principal, support, collegiality) supports action learning as I imagine it would be an uphill battle in some schools.' Many teachers noted the importance of allocated time for sharing strategies: 'How great it was to have time to think about the teaching process and go on to develop ideas/strategies with your colleagues!'

A particular feature identified by the staff to build *capacity* for sustaining their action learning was the development of a strategic plan for professional learning, which was devised by the staff at the end of 2003. This strategic plan included attendance at conferences; visits by the academic partner to discuss action learning; linking to KLAs, such as science; selection of different elements of the model of pedagogy; formation of the mini-action-learning teams; and visiting subject specialists. It was critical that half of the school's budget for Teachers' Professional Learning was allocated for the implementation of the strategic plan. In addition, further money from the school budget was allocated to the purchase of curriculum resources: 'This is an effective form of training and development and needs time and a person's motivation to pursue.'

Although there was a commitment to hold the meetings for the mini-action-learning teams every two weeks during Terms 2–4, these did not continue to occur after the middle of Term 3 as other school priorities took over. The consequence of not continuing the meetings significantly slowed the momentum on action learning, as there was no established forum for sharing and planning ideas for quality teaching. The meetings needed to be regularly held to sustain action learning, as noted in the following teacher statements: 'You can't fit it in as an overlay, it has to be planned and fit into time resources that are already structured' and 'The momentum slowed down because there was less time for planning.' It was clear that a workable plan was needed for 2005: 'To remain on the burner we need a T & D plan for 2005 which has time to meet/talk/share/re-define needs and goals to enable us to reflect, share, plan and further develop our skills and knowledge.'

### **Ways to Share Knowledge with Others**

The results of the survey from the whole staff suggest that the main ways in which knowledge about action learning and quality teaching has been shared were through the high level of staff dialogue; sharing sessions at a staff development day; re-forming of smaller action learning teams; and presentations to four other schools and at a principals' conference.

Written statements on the open-ended questions confirmed that there were multiple ways of sharing knowledge about action learning and quality teaching, including: (i) sharing knowledge in the mini-action-learning teams; (ii) sharing information at conferences and preparing presentations: 'You only get to internalise a concept when you have to teach it to someone else' and 'The momentum slowed at school but I found that by attending conferences and presenting at conferences helped a lot with my personal journey'; and (iii) use of staff meetings: 'There is a lot of planning, sharing and reflecting between staff members—having time to formalise this was good' and '... ability to share ideas in staff meetings—what works for you, giving professional support is vital to this type of learning.' Members of the original school teams have also been invited to talk to other schools: 'Interschool visits promote the quality teaching program and exchange ideas.'

## **Issues**

The teachers felt that this evaluative inquiry was a worthwhile process because it was more rigorous and systematic than what the team members had conducted before. It was a worthwhile process to have both a quantitative survey that was completed individually, as well as qualitative data from the mini-action-learning teams. The findings from the survey and the team discussions provided a deeper understanding to confirm their interpretations about their involvement in action learning for quality teaching.

The school's involvement in the process has built the teachers' capabilities to research practice in their school because this inquiry process was more systematic than normal and had precise data collection. It was done as a team of four but this is consistent with regular school practices. It was worthwhile to ascertain an understanding of where other teachers in the school were at in terms of their personal journey. It was important for the academic partner to help the school-based inquiry team to establish a focus and not try to achieve too much within the one-term time frame. It was also important to have funding for time to do the evaluative inquiry, especially to make it a team approach.

## **Conclusion**

The professional learning resulting from the school's involvement in the AGQTP activity, *Action learning for school teams*, has been sustainable during 2004, but at different rates. The project developed strongly during the funded project time and it was maintained during Term 2, utilising the new mini-action-learning teams. These teams met three or four times in Term 2 and continued activities from their school development day which were designed to further explore the NSW model of pedagogy. However, there is a need for reliable casual relief, rather than being dependent on the principal to relieve teachers. The key facilitator in the school took leave during the last 5 weeks of Term 3, but others in the team completed their work on maths as planned. Different teams focused on developing different aspects of quality teaching.

The action learning process slowed down in Term 3 2004, due to a number of factors. This was mainly because the designated time for the teams to meet was taken over by pressing whole-school matters such as school performance, reporting and mandatory requirements. Upon reflection, the school-based team believes that action learning should not be another 'add-on' to the regular school routines, but be included as a priority in a school management plan and assisted by necessary resources, and that meetings stay prioritised – not subject to change. Perhaps involvement in action learning could vary throughout the year, according to school priorities, term by term. The school expects to maintain momentum during 2005 with a new strategic plan.

In sum, the conditions relevant to the school and teachers that are necessary to encourage the sustainability of professional learning are:

- personal relevance
- school culture
- academic support
- personal reflection
- team discussions
- time release
- in-school facilitator
- collegial support
- strategic plan for professional learning with necessary funding.

It was clear that the NSW model of pedagogy provided a focus for ongoing professional learning. An important outcome of the project is that the language of quality teaching has now permeated school culture and is used on a regular basis when teachers discuss their practice. However, action learning is very intensive, involving time and resources and so needs to be well planned. This project has put the professional learning back in teachers' hands. It was not mandatory and teachers could define their own goals and move at their own pace with support from colleagues, which is consistent with the process supported by action learning.

**Attachment 1**

**Hyacinth Public School**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Survey re “Evaluative Inquiry into the Sustainability of Professional Learning through School-based Action Learning”**

**Section A. For original team members**

**Question 1. Please tick in the appropriate box using the scale that represents inhibited (1) to supportive (5).**

<b>Factors in action learning</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
School culture					
Time release					
Personally relevant					
Academic support					
Collegial support					
Conference attendance					
Visits to other schools					
Coding Model of Pedagogy					
Videoing					
Teacher observation					
Personal reflection					
Learning journals					
“Corridor talk”					
Team discussions					
Time frame (terms 4 & 1)					
DET resources					
Consultants’ visits (Vicki Moses & Ros Adams)					
Other (please specify)					

**Question 2. What were the benefits for you when you engaged in action learning?**

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**Question 3. What factors impeded your participation in action learning?**

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**Question 4. Identify which factors helped to sustain the action learning after Term 1, 2004 on a scale of 1 (not helpful) to 5 (helpful)**

S.D.D. TERM 2

<b>Factors in sustaining action learning</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Original team sharing					
Workshop on Model of Pedagogy					
Workshop on action learning					
Personal reflection, goal setting					
Creation/reforming of action learning sub teams					
Identification and discussion of elements/dimensions					
Viewed video of teaching					
Team planning their own pathway to learning					
Team meetings					
Teacher observation					
School visits					
Learning journals					
Conferences					
Other (please specify)					

**Question 5. What are your current thoughts and feelings about action learning since the end of Term 1 this year?**

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**Question 6. Identify the ways in which knowledge has been shared with others on a scale of 1 (not shared) to 5 (shared).**

		<b>Methods for sharing knowledge</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>SCHOOL</b>	STAFF:						
	Staffroom dialogue						
	Reports at staff meetings						
	Sharing sessions at SDDays						
	Reforming of teams						
	website						
	PARENTS:						
	newsletters						
	School Council meetings						
	P & C meetings						
<b>OTHER SCHOOLS/ WIDER COMMUNITY</b>							
	Presentations to other schools						
	Principal's conference						
	Presenting workshops at conferences						
	Building networks with local schools (eg. Bowral)						
	Attending conferences						
Other (please specify)							

**Question 7. What resources/support do you think you need to sustain action learning beyond the present?**

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# Outback High School

## School Context

Outback High School is a comprehensive secondary school in a remote rural location and is 200 km from the base of the School Education Area. The school has 180 students, 30% of whom are from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. The school draws from five feeder schools up to 100 km away. Most of the staff have been teaching for three or less years, with the majority in their second year of teaching. All but one of the executive is in their role for the first time and in 2003 the school had over 50% staff turnover. One of the 2004 school goals focused on developing the beginning teachers. Another aimed to more effectively engage the senior students. What the school staff lacks in experience, it makes up for in enthusiasm.

## Project Context

The initial project evolved from one of the school goals: to improve the engagement of senior students. The original action learning team consisted of the five executive staff members (principal, deputy principal, three head teachers) and a beginning teacher. The team met regularly to increase their knowledge of the quality teaching framework and to reflect upon their progress. An intended outcome of the project was to write teaching programs with a quality teaching focus. It was intended to implement the programs at the beginning of 2004 and then evaluate their use. The team members also hoped to participate in some coding of each others' lessons. It should be noted that the original funding for this project was split between three schools and, initially, it was unclear as to how much money each school would receive.

## Plan for Sustainability

Towards the end of the funded project in April 2004, the team met and discussed the ways that it could promote the quality teaching framework to the whole school. The team decided on multiple ways to promote the quality teaching framework:

- present their work at the Wollongong sharing conference so that there was an opportunity for reflection
- apply to be part of the University of Newcastle longitudinal study of quality teaching. The team decided to target beginning teachers if successful
- target one element of the quality teaching framework at each of the regular staff meetings
- prepare the presentations on each element to be developed at executive meetings. Each session needed to include a practical component so that staff could try them in their classrooms;
- each executive member was to include the quality teaching framework in their faculty inservice with the requirement that, by the end of 2004, each faculty member was to implement at least one program including the quality teaching framework
- The school management plan for 2004 was designed to include ways to promote quality teaching across the staff and attempt to link the quality teaching to senior engagement.

## Methodology

The evaluative inquiry was conducted for 10 weeks in Term 4, 2004 and used a mixed mode approach. A meeting was held with the school-based inquiry team and a member of the academic research team to devise the plan. It was decided to plan the evaluation using several phases. In addition, statistical data was collected throughout 2004 on the degree of engagement of senior students in their class practice.

Phase 1: An open-ended survey was designed with specific questions for the original action learning group (see Attachment 1). Each team member filled out the brief one-page survey and brought this to a team meeting mid-Term 4. The team used this data as a basis of a focus group discussion which was recorded and transcribed. This data collection was focused on the team's experiences of participating in action learning.

Phase 2: A different survey was generated for the rest of the staff to ascertain the effectiveness of how well they understood the model of pedagogy, and whether this changed their classroom practice. The survey was conducted during a regular staff meeting that had been designated for the report back from each faculty regarding the influence of quality teaching.

## Professional Support Needs, Challenges and Consequences of Engaging in Action Learning

The results of the survey and focus group discussion with the original action learning team identified several key *needs* to support their action learning. First, funding was important to help initiate the action learning. This was particularly an issue for this school as they were uncertain how much funding they would get at the beginning of the project. As one team member commented:

Funding to start with, in order to be able to work together as a team, but then the funding is only decent if we are able to get sufficient casual teachers to cover and I think we also had a problem as we didn't really know how much money we would get, because the number of schools in our project changed. Although we had one meeting, it wasn't very clear how much we would get. That was a difficulty compared to some other projects so I don't think we got as much money, but we used it so that was good.

Another important need to support action learning was having time for meetings, personal reflection, implementation and follow up:

Time is a huge factor in order to complete individual work and to give adequate time to cause change and improvement ... not just having time to do it but also extra time to put it over all your programs. We just had the time for one and now it's impossible to do it to all your programs. You just don't have the time with your normal teaching. Also the implementation of the school project (the writing of programs with quality teaching strategies) had to be done in holiday time.

An important factor, which impacted on whether teachers could get time for reflection and follow-up, was the access to casual teaching support. This was particularly a

problem for this isolated school, which does not have a regular supply of casual teaching staff.

The team identified several *challenges* that hindered their action learning. One particular difficulty was the lack of clear guidance in how much money they were to receive at the beginning of the project, as there were three schools involved. Also there was little guidance given by the academic partner about how to participate in action learning:

I thought one of our difficulties was our academic mentor, because even though he was a really nice man, I don't think he really knew what he was expected to do and I don't think he offered us much help. He couldn't offer us, he didn't know what to talk to us about. Also, because of restricted funding (several thousand dollars), action learning could not be effectively implemented.

Another challenge identified by the team was the time frame of Term 4, 2003 and Term 1, 2004. Both of these terms were described as very busy:

Term 4 is very difficult to try new things because there is planning for the following year. Timetabling, reports and assessment have to be done, exams, Year 12 formal, School Certificate, all the accountability stuff, CAP submissions, school management plans, targets, presentation night.

In regard to the *consequences* of participating in action learning, the team felt that there had been significant improvement in the degree of engagement of students, particularly in senior classes. During the year, teachers were asked to self-report on the degree of engagement of students in their classes. The statistical data (attendance, time on task) showed that senior student engagement had improved over six months by an average of 16% for Year 12 students and an average of 19% for Year 11 students. The teachers believed that this was because of better prepared lessons, which focused on specific elements of the quality teaching framework. One of the teachers commented that the quality teaching framework became a conceptual framework or planning tool for thinking about her lessons: 'When I teach a lesson based on the quality teaching framework, I can see a definite difference with an improvement in students' bookwork and verbal responses.'

### **Capacity to Sustain Professional Learning**

Because the action learning team consisted mainly of the existing executive structure of the school, the team was able to continue beyond the project deadline. During the project, the team used the funds to support dedicated action learning meetings and to enable some release time for them to work on their programming re the quality teaching framework. When the funding finished at the end of Term 1 2004, there were no further dedicated action learning meetings, but because the team was based around the school executive, time in every second executive meeting was allocated to planning staff development activities for both faculty and staff meetings. During this time, goals were set so that the team could map progress. Coincidentally, attendance at one of the QTP conferences at Wollongong by one of the team members highlighted the need to embed the project in the existing professional development structure. A comment by one of the executives in the focus group noted the different ways in which the project continued after Term 1:

Staff meetings, passing on information, knowledge and classroom know how to all staff, faculty meetings, discussions, planning and programming. I thought about the link to the Langford tool seminar at the end of Term 3, this team has planned for similar strategies for junior school. Whole staff intentions to continue in 2005 and extend the process to the junior school and general classroom teaching practices.

### **Ways to Share Knowledge with Others**

The goal of the action learning team beyond the project was to promote knowledge of the quality teaching framework across the rest of the staff, including establishing a structure to promote implementation of the quality teaching elements in lessons. During Terms 2 and 3 2004, each fortnightly staff meeting focused on one element of the QTP framework in an attempt to disseminate key ideas about the QTP framework and how to apply the ideas in classroom practice. Teaching ideas in regard to each element were modelled by different members of the executive at the staff meetings.

A staff survey (see Attachment 1) was devised as part of this evaluative inquiry to ascertain teachers' understanding of the elements of the model of pedagogy. It required teachers to rank each element according to the following scale: not understand (1), limited understanding, (2) and clear understanding (3). The survey was designed to ascertain the teachers' understanding of each of the three dimensions of the model of pedagogy. Data from the survey showed that most of the staff had a good understanding of the six elements in the dimension of intellectual quality. In particular, at least 50% of the staff had a clear understanding of each element except for higher-order thinking.

When asked to report any changes in their teaching in regard to this dimension, teachers made the following comments:

- 'I am analysing what I do in the classroom and give greater thought to lesson preparation.'
- 'I allow students more flexibility in developing alternative solutions. I encourage and support them in their exploration of problematic knowledge.'
- 'Evaluation strategies have improved and I am more aware of how students learn and engage within lessons.'
- '... direction and a clear focus when teaching.'

The survey also showed that most of the staff had a good understanding of the elements in the dimension of intellectual quality. It should be noted that this dimension has not yet been addressed in staff meetings. Nonetheless, a large percentage of the staff had a clear understanding of the elements of engagement and high expectations, which were two of the school goals for the year.

When asked to report any changes in their teaching in regard to this dimension of quality learning environment, teachers made the following comments:

- 'I am very conscious of setting high expectations in assessment work.'
- 'Once understood the framework provides an easy and very helpful set of criteria given that good teachers do these things most of the time anyway.'
- 'I aim the specific quality learning environment indicator towards the completion of outcomes – smooth integration.'

- ‘... development of more structured lessons and programming with a focus in mind’
- ‘... more emphasis on incorporating interesting technologies to improve engagement’.

The survey also showed that most of the staff had a good understanding of the elements in the dimension of significance. It should be noted that this dimension has not yet been addressed in staff meetings.

Although a large percentage of the staff had a clear understanding of the elements, the comments below suggest that this is the dimension that staff are most confused about. When asked to report any changes in their teaching in regard to the dimension of significance, staff made the following comments:

- ‘I find narrative is a good way to help students understand what I am talking about. If I break it down into a story they can relate to it?’
- ‘I don’t feel that I know that much about it all.’
- ‘I consciously try to include all the students in the class more than I did previously.’
- ‘... connectedness – actually connecting one class to the next and making sure that the students realise they are connected and how’.

## Issues

The teachers indicated that their participation in the evaluative inquiry had been a valuable process because it gave the team time to reflect on the process and products of the project. The survey to ascertain the teachers’ understanding of the quality teaching framework was useful because it enabled the team to evaluate their goal to help other teachers on staff better understand elements of the model of pedagogy. Importantly, the survey demonstrated to the executive that there needed to be further development in school professional learning regarding the dimensions of significance and quality learning environment. This process will also inform the changes to the school’s beginning teacher program and will help inform the long-term vision for the school, recorded in the 2005 school management plan.

The teachers felt that collaboration with the academic research team member during the evaluative inquiry was worthwhile as there was guidance from the academic researcher in terms of how to construct a survey and streamline the procedure. Being involved in the school-based research provided a capacity and confidence to conduct further school-based research to evaluate the professional learning outcomes of the school. However, it is critical to not only develop the capacity for school-based research, but also to have time to analyse and reflect upon the data gathered. Hence, funds to assist this process are essential.

## Conclusion

The team’s involvement in the initial *Action learning for school teams* project established a platform to sustain teachers’ professional learning. The project provided a focus, motivation, ownership and resources to get the team started to investigate the quality teaching framework. From the evaluative inquiry, the conditions identified to sustain the team’s professional learning beyond the funded project time were:

- ownership of ideas because of the non-compulsory and flexible nature of the AGQTP, so that teachers could value their existing practice and try to improve it by focusing on a personal area for improvement
- relevance to the school's existing strategic directions and plans
- models of implementation of the quality teaching framework provided by team members to the rest of the staff
- embedding team structures into existing teams, such as the executive and faculty teams
- being able to get together with other teachers and schools at conferences and meetings to share ideas and gain inspiration. This provided confidence to continue to explore further ideas
- active school leadership
- a school culture to promote readiness for change and improvement
- an in-school facilitator to keep the action learning team focused
- financial resources for time to reflect, meet and share ideas.

Interestingly, the core of the original school team was the existing executive, with one additional classroom teacher. This arrangement allowed the team structure to sustain itself after the project finished, to promote change and motivation. In addition, time for quality teaching discussions was provided within the established faculty meeting time, which was a supplementary team structure within the school.

Involvement in the project for the school executive enabled them to better understand and value the pedagogical ideas embedded in the framework. This understanding helped them to develop a specific professional learning program for the rest of the school which will continue into 2005. The main outcome of this ongoing program is that teachers in the school now use the NSW model of pedagogy as a conceptual framework for lesson planning and implementation. This means that teachers focus their planning of a lesson around one or more elements to provide a clearer rationale for their own teaching and student learning.

In spite of the success of the project in the school in terms of promoting the QT framework, the original team felt disappointed that they did not get sufficient funds to properly implement the action learning process, or have clear guidance from the intended support structure external to the school. The original team implemented their own interpretation of action learning and initiated the project with unspecified funding, support and criteria. School-based teams who are engaged in action learning need to fully understand the process and be supported in its implementation from the beginning of the project.

**Attachment 1.**

**Outback High School: Focus Group Questions**

1. What do you understand by the term action learning?

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2. What do you need as a team and as an individual to support your participation in action learning? (physical, personnel, resources and other)

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3. What difficulties did you experience in participating in action learning ?

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4. As a result of your participation in the action learning project has there been any change in your work practices? If so outline them.

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5. In what ways has the project continued after Term 1?

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6. What have been the challenges in continuing?

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# Pemberton Public School

## School Context

Pemberton Public School is located in a large western suburb of Sydney. It has a population of 491 students that is 93% NESB, including 45 different nationalities. It celebrates and enjoys this complex diversity. Teachers are committed to striving for excellence in all curricula, with strong parent support for academic excellence. The school works closely with the local council, using city sites as extensions to the classroom, and sharing its facilities with a range of community organisations. There are 16 mainstream classes and four support classes catering for students with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities. There is a strong focus on ESL support, with regular team teaching and recent participation in an action learning project for ESL pedagogy. In addition, several mathematics projects have been successfully implemented, including *Count Me In Too*, *Count Me Into Measurement*, and *Counting On* with a local secondary school. The school is currently participating in the large-scale evaluation of quality teaching with Newcastle University.

## Project Context

The *Action learning for school teams* project aimed to improve students' literacy through expression of ideas and communication with others, and to assist students in their use of computer-based technologies. An initial voluntary team of seven teachers (Team 1), representing all stages and with expertise in ICT, sought to:

- review current teaching practices
- increase teacher knowledge and understanding of the dimensions and elements of Quality Teaching (QT), with a particular focus on Intellectual Quality
- develop a shared understanding of the QT model
- develop units of work in English that integrate ICT and reflect various elements of the three QT dimensions
- plan, teach and reflect on lessons incorporating QT elements
- evaluate and refine teaching practices to more closely align with the QT model.

Professional learning experiences included full-day workshops to build understanding of the QT model and to reflect on current practices. Meetings and sharing sessions between team members enabled further reflection and identification of issues. Units were written and lessons were trialed, videotaped and coded. The project team remained constant throughout the project, thus providing a coherent and stable environment for ongoing development of a shared understanding of the QT model. A strong collegial network was established, with a planned schedule of meetings to support planning, implementation, discussion and reflection. Greater reflection, more professional dialogue and professional reading occurred as a result of the project. The success of the initial action learning project was attributed to the availability of time for discussion and planning, with meetings frequently held off-site; the professional support from an academic partner, and commitment from the team.

## Plan for Sustainability

A number of strategies were identified as critical in enabling continued action learning within the school community. These included:

- the small team approach, with a negotiated focus for the action learning project
- support from an academic partner
- time for reflection, planning and ongoing professional dialogue
- cooperative development of units of work that incorporated QT elements
- videoing of lessons to enable reflection on practice.

Participants in the project indicated that a framework for unit writing, incorporating the elements of QT, would support unit development and that more time for building knowledge, planning units, and reflecting on videoed lessons would also be beneficial.

After the completion of the *Action learning for school teams* project, the school allocated funds for a second team (Team 2) of six teachers to participate in an action learning project that built on the strengths of the earlier project. Teachers volunteered to join this second group, with representatives from all stages and one teacher from the school's support classes. The teachers worked with the same academic partner to develop an understanding of the QT model, reflect on practice and plan units of work. They then implemented lessons, reflected on their experiences, shared successes and identified issues. In addition to the development of a second team of learners, whole-school professional learning experiences were planned that involved the academic partner facilitating school development days and staff meetings. Both teams met early in Term 4 to share experiences and plan further professional learning activities.

The expression of interest to be involved in the evaluative inquiry indicated that professional learning for QT was an ongoing component of the school's management plan and that time and resources had been allocated to facilitate the engagement with the QT model. The school team members were keen to:

- further understand how engaging in school-based action learning can assist teacher professional learning
- identify conditions that support school-based action learning so that teachers are better equipped to improve student learning outcomes
- work with an academic partner to bring a different perspective and new strategies to the school context.

## Method

The school team for the evaluative inquiry included an assistant principal who had a Year 2/3 class, a teacher of Year 5, and a K-3 support teacher of an IO class. The initial meeting between the school team and the academic team member clarified the purpose of the evaluative inquiry and led to the identification of sub-questions for each of the three main research questions. Both of the QT teams had already recorded their learning in several ways, including reflective writing and units of work. These were discussed as possible forms of evidence that could be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the professional learning experiences. In addition, the school team wanted to seek information about particular aspects of the QT model, as well as evidence of deep learning, and agreed to survey each of the QT teams.

During this initial meeting, it was revealed that a third QT team would be given the opportunity to work with the original academic partner during Term 1, 2005. It was anticipated that a group of 6 or 7 of the remaining 14 teachers would ‘volunteer’ to participate in the action learning project.

### **Professional Support Needs, Challenges and Consequences of Engaging in Action Learning?**

A dinner meeting was held for the seven members of Team 1 to discuss the benefits of the action learning project, to identify changes in practice, and to plan future professional learning experiences. The main benefits identified included time for discussion and reflection, working in a team to share experiences, allowing individuals to take small steps, and meeting away from school to avoid interruptions and to sustain engagement. The reflective writing of Team 1 indicated that three members were consciously building specific elements into their lessons, particularly problematic knowledge and explicit quality criteria. While four members of the team commented that the process highlighted teachers’ ability to achieve the expectations of the QT model, three other members questioned the focus on the model.

Six of the seven members from Team 1 completed the survey (see Attachment 1). Responses suggested that most members were keen to learn about the QT model and to explore ways to improve practice, although there was some anxiety about analysing the videoed lessons. Coding was viewed as helpful to set standards and expectations about teaching practice, although teachers tended to be overcritical of themselves. It was considered easier to code an ‘unknown’ teacher from the QT video, rather than someone from the team. One respondent noted that coding can be viewed negatively with judgements about whether the teaching is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, with an implication that a ‘5’ was required for good teaching. The language of the model was a little overwhelming at first, with possibly too many elements to engage with and some elements a little difficult to distinguish between. These included narrative and metalanguage. Some suggested that the Intellectual Quality dimension is difficult to implement with young NESB students.

Four teachers responded positively to the fourth survey question about their ability to change practice as their knowledge of the elements grew. Several indicated that they were now more aware of their practice, and that the opportunities to share experiences with colleagues were helpful. One suggested that the experience was ‘very positive as it gives a framework for improvement and a set of criteria for mental checking’. Two teachers indicated that they did not need to change their practice, although there may have been some improvements. While it was clear that videoing and coding of teachers’ own lessons was rather confronting, it was generally considered to be a useful learning tool, frequently affirming good practice. Developing the unit of work using the QT elements was not considered easy. Several members of the team indicated that they would prefer a scaffold/template and more support for this.

In summary, the main challenges from participation were identified as:

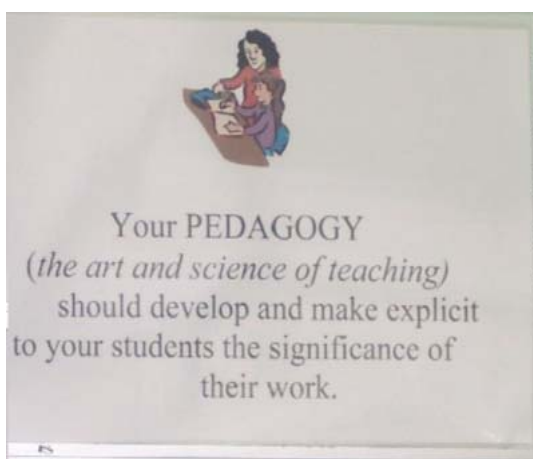
- developing a deep understanding of the QT model
- coding their own lessons from videotapes
- developing units of work that incorporated the elements of the QT model.

## Capacity to Sustain Action Learning

The school plan for implementing the QT model indicated the tasks for Terms 2 and 3 to sustain action learning in the school (see Attachment 2). This plan proposed ongoing whole-school activities, facilitated by members of Team 1, as well as tasks for the second team of teachers to work on with the academic partner.

In addition, Team 1 would continue to plan and program using the ideas they had developed during the project. In particular, to share their understanding of the QT model and support other members of the school staff to become more familiar with the model, members of Team 1 developed stage-based units of work on the Olympic games. The Stage 1 unit, *The Symbols of the Olympic Games*, incorporated the key learning areas (KLAs) of English, HSIE, CPA (the Visual Art component) and PDHPE. The QT elements were listed on the first page with an identifying code for each element. Within the unit, each learning experience was coded according to the focus elements. The Stage 2 unit, *What are the Olympic Games?* incorporated English and HSIE, and a similar coding system was used with a particular focus on the dimension of Intellectual Quality. The Stage 3 unit, *Ancient and Modern Olympic Games: Different Times, Same Issues*, sought to address outcomes from all six KLAs. These units culminated in a school Olympic Games event.

Further evidence of the focus on the QT model was witnessed when the academic team member went to the staff common room for morning tea on one of her visits. She noted the displays related to QT on the walls and took several photographs. The displays included lists of the three dimensions with related elements as well as posters about QT and pedagogy. Two examples are presented below.



To evaluate the professional learning of the second team, all six teachers completed the survey presented in Attachment 3. Responses to the first question about professional learning activities indicated that all members of this team had participated in the full range of experiences from the list. Every member of the team reported that the action learning from the QT project was successful, with suggestions that there was:

- time to digest the information and reflect on practice
- discussion with colleagues
- professional dialogue, which enabled the strengthening of teaching philosophies
- learning about QT with peers
- explanation of the theory and practical advice for implementation.

Team 2 reported similar responses to those of Team 1 in relation to the language of the QT model and the difficulty of understanding some of the dimensions and elements. Several additional elements were identified by Team 2 as challenging to understand, including higher-order thinking, problematic knowledge, and student self-regulation. The coding was viewed as necessary in order to develop a deeper understanding of the model. This team did not videotape their lessons, so the somewhat negative comments about this from Team 1 were not evident in Team 2 responses. However, reflecting on practice had enabled this group of teachers to identify their individual strengths and weaknesses.

All members of Team 2 indicated that they had been able to effect change in their classroom practice. Comments typically suggested that planning had become more thorough, some elements had become a focus in lessons, and the model had assisted with the development of new teaching strategies and a better learning environment. One teacher stated, 'It has made a great difference – understanding the elements is one thing, but to put it into practice is a lot harder.' Unit writing was again identified as challenging although it had 'led to gaining a deeper understanding of concepts to be taught in order to plan activities so students could achieve deeper understanding and promote higher-order thinking'.

### **Impact of the Projects**

The 13 people who formed the first two QT teams were generally positive about their experiences, and agreed that the workshops with the academic partner, designed to develop their knowledge of the model and assist them to reflect on their practice, had been worthwhile. In addition, there had been several whole-school meetings focused on understanding the dimensions and elements of the QT model; coding of lessons from the videos; and considering ways to incorporate the model into lessons and units of work.

Units of work on the Olympic Games had also provided a whole-school focus on the QT model. Three teachers asked their students about their learning experiences during the Olympic Games units. Students from a Stage 1 class indicated that they had been encouraged to listen to others' ideas, and to create and share their own designs. The teacher had focused on student direction in her plans and thought the students' responses had indicated an awareness of this focus. A Stage 2 class stated that they found the Internet research work relevant. They liked finding information in newspapers, and enjoyed learning about Greece and current events. This teacher had focused on the Significance dimension and the students' responses seemed to reflect this focus. Students from another Stage 2 class stated:

- 'Maths is important and it makes you think.'
- 'Language is really important in learning maths.'
- 'We have to work hard in maths.'
- 'We like choosing activities.'
- 'You need maths when you go shopping.'
- 'We learn English from doing maths.'
- 'We have to do our best work in maths.'

During mathematics lessons, the teacher had promoted engagement, student direction, connectedness and high expectations. She was pleased with the students' responses to the lessons.

A selection of student work samples related to the Stage 2 unit of work on the Olympic Games, illustrated several elements from the QT model. Students explored the similarities and differences between the ancient and modern Olympic Games, using a Venn diagram. While a template was provided, the task required considerable investigation to identify aspects of the games that were common to both; those that applied only to the ancient Games; and those that applied only to the modern Games. Students discussed the results of their investigations and summarised the outcomes on the worksheets. The level of detail in their responses indicates that there had been high expectations and explicit quality criteria for the task. Aspects of cultural knowledge and connectedness are evident through an identification of the roles of men and women in the ancient Games, and the experiences of students with watching more recent Games events through the media.

The school plan for 2005 proposed that a third team be formed to work with the academic partner in the same way that the earlier teams had. An invitation to join Team 3 was presented at a staff meeting during Term 4. From this, only one teacher volunteered. Others were approached and another four agreed to participate. It is possible that the time of year mitigated against enthusiasm to join the group. The plan also identified tasks for Teams 1 and 2 in order to maintain momentum and to broaden the action learning experiences to assessment. The plan also identified issues to be addressed during 2005.

## **Issues**

While the school team agreed that engagement with the QT model had been successful, with most teachers recognising the potential to improve teaching and learning, there were several issues to consider when planning ongoing professional learning.

### *1. Developing a culture of learning*

Most teachers from Teams 1 and 2 valued the opportunities that had been provided for learning about QT and realised the potential for further learning. As further evidence of this, two members of Team 1, and 3 members of Team 2 attended a conference in January to further develop their knowledge and understanding of the QT model. However, others saw participation in the project as affirming their current practice and indicated that change may not be necessary. This presents a challenge for organising professional learning opportunities in 2005 so that the whole-school community engages in action learning as part of their professional development.

There is a need to develop a culture of learning, with time for sharing learning experiences and time for reflection if the implementation of QT is to be sustained in the future. The 2005 plan provides funds to support a new team but time for the earlier teams to meet is also critical. Opportunities for further professional dialogue would enable more action learning to occur.

### *2. Supporting collaborative practices*

Staff particularly valued opportunities to meet, share ideas, and reflect on their efforts to implement QT elements. However, members from Teams 1 and 2 had not had many opportunities at this stage to share their experiences and to learn from each other. The original plans were for these two teams to work on the Olympic Games unit of work together but this did not occur, due to time constraints. More collaboration between the teams is desirable in 2005, with teachers acting as mentors for the rest of the staff.

It is also time to build stage teams into the process. Teams 1 and 2 contained teachers from all stages but they mainly worked in isolation so it is important to expand networks within stages to sustain planning and programming. The potential for mentoring within stages and team teaching in pairs will be explored next year and stage planning days have been identified in the calendar during Terms 1–3, 2005. Lesson observations and shared reflection amongst members of each stage will be encouraged as a strategy to sustain engagement and momentum.

### *3. Writing integrated units of work and assessment tasks*

One issue for several members of both teams was writing units of work that incorporate the QT elements. A framework for unit development would support these efforts as there is a desire to develop more integrated units of work that promote knowledge integration. In addition, a focus on assessment and reporting will continue the development of knowledge about the QT model. Currently, there appears to be little consistency in reporting practices so this could be addressed through writing units of work, designing assessment tasks and planning new approaches for reporting to parents.

### *4. Engaging in an evaluative inquiry to ascertain sustainability of professional learning*

Members of the school team agreed that the evaluative inquiry was a worthwhile vehicle for systematically gathering evidence to evaluate the sustainability of professional learning. The scaffold of the three main research questions provided a framework to explore particular sub-questions of interest in the school context. The use of an academic team member supported the process by providing advice and feedback on the data collected and the analysis undertaken.

## **Conclusion**

The evaluative inquiry has provided a method of critically examining the approaches adopted by the school to bring about a focus on quality teaching and learning through engagement with the NSW Quality Teaching model, and whether these approaches have been able to sustain change beyond the project. The adopted approach of forming small teams that work with an academic partner to develop their knowledge and understanding of quality teaching and learning has been very successful. To support this learning, the school has devoted substantial professional learning funds to engage the academic partner beyond the life of the original project and to provide significant teacher release from class. They remain committed to this approach, as another team of teachers will participate in this activity during the first half of next year.

The development of units of work on the Olympic Games provided further opportunity to engage the whole-school community with the QT model. However, the school team identified several issues to be addressed if the action learning processes are to be sustained in 2005 and beyond. In particular, developing a culture of learning within stages would further support planning and developing lessons, programs and units of work, as well as reflection on practice. Sharing learning within and between teams needs to be developed and maintained, with time available for this to occur.

## **Attachment 1**

### **Staff Survey – Team 1**

1. What expectations did you bring to the first workshop of the *Action learning for school teams* project?
2. What was your response to the language of the Quality Teaching model, i.e. dimensions and elements?

Were there specific dimensions and/or elements that were more challenging to understand?

List the elements you are still unclear about.

3. What impact did the coding scale on the ‘lesson coding’ sheet have on you?
3. How has your knowledge of the elements made you feel about your ability to change your classroom practice?
4. How useful was filming and watching one of your lessons, in identifying your strengths and weaknesses?
5. How comfortable did you feel in writing a unit of work with evidence of the Quality Teaching elements?

**Attachment 2****School Plan for Implementing the Quality Teaching Model****Term 2**

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>All Staff</b>	<b>Team 2 – At School</b>	<b>Team 2 - Formal</b>
Week 1	QTM introduction	Identify members for Team 2 to cover Stages 1 to 3 and a support teacher	
Week 2	Intellectual Quality: Revisit, watch and code lesson (Maths length), discussion		
Week 3			Workshop 1 with academic partner – whole day Task before next workshop – choose a lesson and code it for reflection on teaching
Week 4	Quality Learning Environment: Revisit, watch and code lesson (HSIE), discussion		
Week 5		Implement task from first workshop	
Week 6	Significance: Revisit, watch and code lesson (English), discussion	Implement task from first workshop	
Week 7			Workshop 2 – half day Sharing reflections from lesson coding and prepare for unit writing
Week 8	All Dimensions: Revisit, watch and code lesson (Visual Arts), discussion		
Week 9			
Week 10			

**Term 3**

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>All Staff</b>	<b>Team 2 – At School</b>	<b>Team 2 - Formal</b>
Week 1	QTM Workshop Mapping of QT elements for a unit of work		
Week 2	Stage Group Meetings: Plan a unit of work for Term 4 – focus on Intellectual Quality		
Week 3			Workshop 3 – half day Map QT elements for a unit of work
Week 4	Continue unit writing	Video a lesson	
Week 5		Video a lesson	
Week 6	Finalise unit		Workshop 4 – half day Reflections from videoing
Week 7			
Week 8	Reflections to date and planning professional learning for 2005		
Week 9			
Week 10	Finalise plan for 225		

### Attachment 3

#### Staff Survey – Team 2

1. Indicate which professional learning activities you have attended in the past

<input type="checkbox"/>	Tuesday staff meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>	Conferences
<input type="checkbox"/>	After school activities at other venues	<input type="checkbox"/>	Staff Development Day sessions
<input type="checkbox"/>	Action research projects	<input type="checkbox"/>	Consultant based programs, eg CMIT
<input type="checkbox"/>	Whole day inservice courses	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please list)

2. Do you think the action learning model, as you experienced it in the QT project, was successful for your professional learning? Please list reasons why.

3. What was your response to the language of the Quality Teaching model, ie dimensions and elements?

Were there specific dimensions and/or elements that were more challenging to understand?

List the elements you are still unclear about.

4. What impact did the coding scale on the 'lesson coding' sheet have on you?

5. How has your knowledge of the elements made you feel about your ability to change your classroom practice?

6. How useful was reflecting on your lessons, in identifying your strengths and weaknesses?

7. How comfortable did you feel in writing a unit of work with evidence of the Quality Teaching elements?

# **Senton High School**

## **School Context**

Senton is located some 100 kms north of Sydney in the lower Hunter Valley. It is a large secondary school with over 1200 students from a wide diversity of social backgrounds and a range of academic abilities. With a staff of over 70, again with a wide range of teaching experience, many over 20 years, the challenge to bring about effective change through action learning and quality teaching is considerable.

## **Project Context**

Senton High initiated the quality teaching project in Term 4, 2003 with a small across-curriculum team. The team's intention was to investigate strategies to improve their own teaching and to develop a portfolio-style assessment for students in Year 7, based around a task that integrated a number of KLAs. They have not only sustained their own learning and the Year 7 project, but have engaged a significant proportion of the staff in learning about quality teaching through action learning in three new projects.

The initial project was ambitious and far reaching. A small team of volunteers from different faculties, led by two staff who had undertaken postgraduate studies in quality teaching at the University of Newcastle, worked together to investigate their own classroom practice, using the NSW DET quality teaching framework. As well as meeting to engage actively with the model and its elements, they also undertook peer observations, including videos, and reflective discussions of their attempts to implement elements of the model in their classrooms. They also made regular reports of their activities to full staff meetings, encouraged in their work by the principal and supported strongly by their academic partner, who has continued to work with them during 2004. Attempts, with differing success, were made to engage other teachers in team members' faculties with the quality teaching framework.

A significant part of the initial project was to design and implement a task, particularly emphasising multi-literacies, to be undertaken by all Year 7 students, that integrated KLAs to different degrees. Each student presented the results of their work to a panel, including members of the local community, trained for their roles, for the purposes of assessing student learning outcomes across a number of KLAs. The design and implementation of the task and its processes reflected a number of elements of the quality teaching model, particularly engagement, student direction, deep understanding, metalanguage, substantive communication and cultural significance, and were developed using a collegial action learning model.

## **Plan for Sustainability**

At the completion of the first round of quality teaching, the results of action learning in relation to quality teaching and the Year 7 project were, as might be expected, varied. The core project team had developed a strong knowledge base to inform their teaching and the implementation of the Year 7 project. In faculties where project team members found a ready and receptive climate, the development of a knowledge base about quality teaching had begun. In other faculties, for a variety of reasons, there was lack of interest and, in some extreme cases, active antagonism towards quality teaching and the Year 7 project. There is no doubt that the size of the school presented particular challenges and,

to some extent, as is often the case in school change, there were perceptions of an ‘in-group’/‘out-group’ phenomenon. As was noted in the final report of the initial project, often the response to change is resistance, which comes in many forms. There was a need to build further shared ownership and professional responsibility for learning, along with confidence, for staff to try different teaching strategies, derived from engagement with the NSW quality teaching framework.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the original project team embarked on an even more ambitious program after the conclusion of Term 1, 2004. Three of the original team members led three new teams, using cycles of action learning:

#### Team A

One of the initial project coordinators had a team of 11 (3 head teachers, 8 classroom teachers) drawn from different KLAs. Their focus was to build interdisciplinary links, 7-10, by developing scaffolds and rubrics, particularly related to multi-literacies, for planning and developing lessons/units that incorporate the elements of the NSW quality teaching model. These will be available to all staff via the school intranet in 2005. This team is also continuing the planning and implementation of the 2005 Year 7 panel presentations.

#### Team B

The other initial project coordinator worked with 6 staff from Senton (acting principal, two head teachers and two teachers) and a number of feeder primary school principals. Their task was to develop instruments and protocols that will be completed by incoming Year 7 students at the end of Term 1, 2005. Data gathered will provide both a benchmark for later comparison and a data base of the experiences, abilities, educational needs and characteristics of the students, so that planning for their learning in Year 7 can be more effective. Results will also be compared with scope and sequence charts, already developed, of the Year 7 curriculum. Both the instruments and the resultant learning experiences will be within a context of the NSW quality teaching model, particularly emphasising the dimensions of intellectual quality and significance.

#### Team C

A third member of the original team worked with two teachers, one from Science and one from TAS, who were not engaged in the original project. Their task was to gather information from every teacher regarding their attitudes towards the NSW quality teaching model, based on their experience in 2003–04, and their self-reported professional needs, related to learning about the model and engaging with it in their own classrooms. The results were to inform plans for further professional development in the school.

The work of these three teams was supported through a focus on professional learning, some directly related to quality teaching, taking place within the various committees of the school and in extended executive meetings. Time was created for team meetings through school-based funding. The teams engaged in discussing readings pertinent to their work, and a diary to stimulate reflection about the NSW model and its application in the classroom was developed for use in the teams. Further sessions in coding some of the videos from the original NSW project also occurred.

## **Method**

Data for the evaluative inquiry have been gathered in two main ways. First, focus discussions were held by the leaders of teams A and B with their team members. In addition, a focus interview took place between the three team leaders in response to the three research questions. Second, the most extensive data were gathered through a survey compiled by team C for all staff. There were 46/77 complete replies received. Analysis of these with the academic team member provided a rich data base for future planning. The following sections are based on an analysis of all of these data.

## **Professional Support Needs, Challenges and Consequences**

Support for the teams' action learning reportedly came from a number of sources. Release time for meetings was very important. While team members gave much of their own after-school time, they were also supported for the equivalent of three days release through school funding and funds from the evaluative inquiry.

There is also a strong feeling that a generally positive climate in the school towards teams' work, particularly the interdisciplinary Year 7 project, was another important factor. This climate is especially characteristic of the principal, members of executive and head teachers. The principal's leadership, in delegating responsibility and ownership to the team to follow new directions and strategies, was regarded as highly significant by team leaders. In addition, the very active and continuing support of the school's academic partner was reported as very important in shaping plans and processes of the three teams.

Factors that inhibited effectiveness in continuing the initial project were reported mainly as negative attitudes of a number of staff, because of their experience in the initial project. This was certainly reflected in the survey responses by staff, where some 50% of respondents indicated negative words in association with the NSW quality teaching model, although this was true of some faculties more than others. On the other hand, nearly 50% of respondents indicated that knowledge of the quality teaching framework had caused them to reflect 'regularly' or 'sometimes' on their teaching and nearly 25% indicated that the Year 7 project had developed strong cross-faculty conversations and cooperation. In addition, when teachers were asked to identify what was happening in their classroom when things were going well, there was a strong emphasis on students and student engagement and little comment on management issues.

Survey responses overall identified all of the difficulties in realising an effective change in the culture of teaching and learning in a school. Providing an opportunity for teachers to express their feelings and developing a data base of their attitudes by faculty was an important step in developing a strategic plan to continue action learning, related to quality teaching, in the school. Another factor reported as an inhibitor was available time, particularly during Term 4, and this factor was related to a lack of sufficient funds, which meant that in the increasing busyness of school life it was very difficult to get all members of the teams together at the same time.

Reported benefits from participating in the continuation of action learning since Term 1 are various. Members of all teams reported an increased understanding of quality teaching and its application in the classroom. Each of the current team leaders commented upon increased opportunities for developing leadership skills in relation to working with teams. Part of this has resulted from focused reflection on themselves and

their interpersonal skills and attitudes. There was also reported increased learning about action learning and its use in professional development and curriculum change in schools.

Across the school there is a perception by team leaders that the level of professional conversation has increased, although survey results would indicate that this may well be restricted to some faculties more than others and is more likely to focus on the interdisciplinary ideas in the Year 7 project. Certainly, survey results seemed to indicate that there was a wide appreciation of issues beyond a teacher's own faculty.

Many of the challenges to sustaining action learning have already been identified. However, one of the most significant and difficult challenges, particularly for members of the original team, was to accept and be prepared to deal with the negative attitudes and perceptions of a number of staff to the work of the original team in 2003–04, despite the acknowledged success of the Year 7 project, to the point where it has now been adopted as part of the permanent program. The three current team leaders demonstrated great skill in being prepared to listen to the perceptions and criticisms of some staff, and to reflect on these as they moved forward with their work.

### **Capacity to Sustain Action Learning**

There are several factors, already identified, that supported the continuance of action learning in the school. First, the school has a history of actively supporting innovation by staff. It also has many of the characteristics of a professional learning community, where both student and teacher learning are viewed as important. Leadership support from principal and executive strongly underpin these attitudes and practices.

Second, and related to the factors identified above, the majority of teaching staff are prepared to trial new ways of teaching and learning, particularly if the results can be observed in more effective learning by students. Thus, even though many staff in survey responses expressed rather negative views about the NSW quality teaching framework discussion paper, they were more strongly positive about the Year 7 integrated program, which itself incorporated a number of the quality teaching elements, because of the perceptions of improved student learning outcomes it produced.

A third factor was the opportunity for the three days equivalent release time for the action learning teams to meet, work, share and reflect, both separately and together. The funds to do this came from project resources. This opportunity for teams to meet certainly enabled the inclusion of teachers who were not part of the original team, including principals from primary feeder schools.

A final factor that inhibited, to some extent, the capacity to sustain action learning in the wider school was the presence of negative attitudes towards the original team and its work, held by a number of teaching staff. The causes of such attitudes are not entirely clear. From survey results, some appear to be associated with the discussion paper and its presentation of contents; some with a misinterpretation that the quality teaching framework would become mandatory; and some with the reaction that the elements were nothing new or different. Some attitudes, however, can be linked to a perceived 'in-group' (the project team)/'out-group' (all other teachers) phenomenon, common in many change contexts. Some survey respondents suggested that the team members were mainly interested in enhancing their own careers, while team members suggested that some attitudes may have derived from jealousies concerning the extra resources, time and opportunities for conference presentations, including an overseas conference. No matter

what the actual reasons, the survey responses serve as a reminder of the delicate balance of relationships and the importance of authentic communication as a central element of any successful school change process.

### **Ways to Share Knowledge with Others**

The major strategy for sharing knowledge developed through the action learning teams was that of face-to-face communication. The results from the original project were communicated in staff and faculty meetings and through resources and processes associated with the Year 7 program and its portfolio and panel assessment. Reports were also made by members of the team about their various regional, state and international conference presentations. Action learning was used as the major process in each of the three new project teams for decision making related to their focus task. Reports from each of these teams were provided to executive, faculty and full staff meetings.

### **Issues**

All members of the three teams reported that participation in the evaluative inquiry was worthwhile. The strongest reason given was the opportunity to be critically reflective of the experience and processes of action learning and the development of the Year 7 project. Some of this occurred through team focus discussions. As well, for team C, it also resulted from the design and development of the survey and the analysis of the collated results. Members of team C reported development of knowledge and skills in the design and use of surveys for use in school-based change.

Team leaders indicated that the survey data provided a useful picture of the perceptions of, and attitudes towards, quality teaching and the project in 2003–04, as well as a useful sketch of some aspects of staff and school politics. While some of the data were confronting, they were also a strong motivation towards continuing with the work of the teams and improving the manner in which the processes were undertaken, based on the learning from the results of the survey. In addition, the data provided a very useful planning tool for further professional development in faculties and the school.

### **Conclusion**

There was strong opinion from team members that the processes of action learning encouraged teachers to take risks and collectively investigate their classroom practice. Members of the three current teams identified several factors that they believe are essential to sustaining professional learning in schools. First, while the knowledge, skills and experience of action learning and building the capacity in staff to use these as a model of professional development is essential, it is not sufficient without adequate funds to support teacher release to engage in professional learning. They suggest that, while professional learning funds allocated to schools go some way to meet the need for teacher release, these are not adequate to support the type and extent of professional learning that has been undertaken at Senton secondary school during 2003–04. The other major factor to support teacher professional learning was identified as the principal's and executive's attitude towards teachers attempting to realise school-based cultural change, and their support through delegated ownership and responsibility to those teachers.

There is no doubt that the Senton High School action learning team members have not only been able to sustain their action learning and its focus on quality teaching in the very ambitious initial project, but they have been able to begin an even more extensive

programme, engaging nearly one-third of the staff in the school. There are some significant challenges in achieving the ambitious goals of the three current teams. Not least of these will be to change the attitudes of a significant proportion of staff, particularly in some faculties, towards the NSW quality teaching model. Part of this challenge will be to use the widely and positively accepted Year 7 project as a vehicle to refocus attention on engagement with the quality teaching framework. Strong enthusiasm and commitment by teams, and particularly team leaders, to realise the desired changes are important forces to meet these challenges. One important indicator already is that 13 staff members have indicated that they will attend the 'Pedagogy in Practice' conference in 2005, compared to two in 2004.

# Tea Tree Public School

## School Context

Tea Tree Public School is a small rural school in a geographically isolated town on the south-western plains of New South Wales. The school shares a site with the local public high school and this allows for interaction and cooperation between the staff of the two schools. The primary school has 214 students and each of the eight classes includes students with a range of abilities. Some classes are stage-based, some age-based. The nine teachers employed within the school range in years of experience from more than 20 years to less than 1 year. There is a core of experienced teachers who have remained at the school for between 10 and 20 years and there are a number of early-career teachers who have joined the staff on a temporary basis over the past three years.

The principal reported that the school has had a continuing commitment to professional learning for teachers over many years. The staff have been encouraged to participate in a range of professional learning activities, such as: two-hour after-school workshops; one day 'courses' provided by external presenters, based within or outside the DET; and longer term projects which involve both expert input and opportunity for exploration in the real-world context of the individual teachers' classrooms.

## Project Context

The initial AGQTP project focused on developing teacher understanding and implementation of the *Science and Technology K-6 Syllabus*. Throughout the project two distinct cycles of planning, development, implementation and critical reflection were engaged with: one in Term 4, 2003 and one in Term 1, 2004. The principal recognised that the teachers needed both time and support with this curriculum area in order to develop skills to apply to their classroom teaching. With this in mind, the focus was on developing units of work based on the Big Ideas contained in the *Supporting SciTech* CD-ROM, and using the implementation of these units as the driving vehicle to introduce the quality teaching framework. Each staff member was provided with at least three days of release from their class at the beginning of each cycle to work with the academic partner, the district Science Consultant and the members of their stage team. During the teaching of the units the teachers were again provided with some release time to engage in conversations with their stage members and also the Senior Project Officer, Quality Teacher Program. In total, sixteen units of work were developed, trialed and assessed by stage teams, working together, and then critically evaluated by the whole-school team. These units were edited and published during Term 2, 2004.

## Plan for Sustainability

The action learning process engaged with throughout the initial AGQTP project was recognised as an effective way to organise professional learning experiences for this school staff. The size of the staff allows for all teachers to be included and involved in the action learning process. Evaluations of the capacity of action learning to facilitate professional learning experiences revealed that there were a number of components that had worked well and the school identified that these needed to be sustained. These included the provision of further opportunities for both formal and informal collaboration amongst all staff members and individual stage teams; and the need to focus on an area for professional growth identified by the staff. The opportunity for input and support

from ‘experts’ on the school site to work with the teachers in programming, reflecting, evaluating, collaborating and engaging in professional dialogue was identified as another area that needed to be continued. The incorporation of these elements in a new professional learning experience was being negotiated at the time of the evaluative inquiry.

## **Method**

The action learning team at Tea Tree Public School incorporated all of the teaching staff within the school. As such, it was decided that all staff members would be invited to contribute to the collected data. For the purposes of the evaluative inquiry project, a three-phase methodology was devised.

- Phase One: Action Learning Team Review articulated the action learning process, project focus areas and future direction (this was led by the academic team member during school visit), conducted with principal, assistant principals and one early-career teacher.
- Phase Two: Semi-structured focus group interviews within Stage teams (see Attachment 1). Throughout interviews notes were taken, and discussion was audio-taped and transcribed.
- Phase Three: The principal, two assistant principals and an early-career Stage 1 teacher, in consultation with the academic team member, collated the data and analysed it for this report.

## **Professional Support Needs, Challenges and Consequences for Engaging in Action Learning**

A unique feature of action learning within this school context was the provision for all staff to be involved. All the teachers were provided with the opportunity to engage with the action learning process through the allocation of time within the stage group structure. The nature of this organisation was inclusive, as everyone was working towards the same goal. A Stage 1 teacher commented: ‘All doing it together meant that we were comfortable asking questions.’

The action learning process supported the professional learning needs of these teachers. A recurring theme throughout the data collected from the teachers was the value of this professional learning experience over other typical experiences. The school’s geographical location physically isolates the teachers from others in their district. Teachers are often required to travel 165 kilometres for professional learning opportunities, which are typically conducted after school. One Stage 1 teacher commented: ‘Usually, we travel and get enthused and then we come back.’ Often the enthusiasm and motivation gained from the experience was lost before any implementation had occurred. Such professional learning experiences were considered by many staff members to typically be isolated, decontextualised experiences, in contrast to the school-based action learning experience.

The incorporation of ‘experts’ selected by the school was a key enabler for action learning in this context. Throughout the initial action learning project, the school developed strong partner links with its academic partner and district personnel. Every teacher spoke highly of the ‘experts’ involved within this project and the role they played. One teacher commented: ‘They pushed us in the right direction and got us to ask questions and think’.

A key finding from the evaluation of action learning was the value that the teachers placed on having 'expert' personnel come to them for extended periods of time to facilitate professional learning opportunities. Comments made by the teachers around this issue found that it was not only the effort and commitment to the project demonstrated by each of the expert advisers that made this valuable, but also the opportunities thus created for the 'experts' to come into the individual classrooms and focus input at that level. One teacher commented: 'They [the experts] came and taught in our classrooms and were in touch with the real world.' Another teacher commented: 'They understood the classroom reality.' Such interaction meant that the professional learning experience was meaningful and responsive to teachers' professional reality.

A challenge for professional learning experiences is the teachers' access to time to engage with the experiences. The availability of time throughout the action learning experience provided teachers with planned, sustained periods for them to collaborate with each other; engage in professional dialogue; read professional literature; and support each other through the process. A Stage 3 teacher identified a key challenge to the action learning process, stating that it 'can't be maintained ... without the time and money'. The provision of planning time before the teaching of the specific units was identified as a positive aspect of the process. A number of teachers commented that this provided time for teachers to collect meaningful and relevant resources to enhance the developed learning and teaching experiences. However, the availability of casual teachers to release teachers during the action learning and the evaluative inquiry project was a consistent challenge for this school community.

The collected data identified specific elements of the action learning experience that impacted on the teachers who participated in the process. The teachers responded to having the professional learning experience address an area of particular professional need at their school. The teachers identified that this professional learning experience was positive, as it focused on an area that they had identified as relevant to their own professional context. The assistant principal explained that 'science was seen as a priority for improvement' and was therefore considered to be a logical focus for the action learning project. The teachers appeared to respond to having control over their professional learning agenda, and collected data demonstrated they were keen to maintain this level of control.

### **Capacity to Sustain Action Learning**

The collected data identified that there were key factors that demonstrated the school's capacity to sustain action learning. The teachers involved with the action learning process were able to identify focus areas for future action learning projects and were keen to continue the action learning process.

The importance of a collaborative and supportive school culture was identified by a number of teachers on this staff (all the early-career teachers made reference to this point). A key feature of the sustainability of the action learning process in this site was the ownership over the focus of professional learning amongst the staff. The involvement of all teaching staff in the action learning experience empowered them to take control and set the agenda for their own professional learning. Throughout the collected data many teachers identified curriculum areas that could be focused on through the action learning process. A Stage 2 teacher indicated that there was a need to 'do another project in a similar fashion in another KLA'.

The teachers identified that they had gained strategies from engaging with the action learning experience that they could use to support future professional learning. One Stage 1 teacher described how they used the programming skills they had developed in planning for other curriculum areas. Another teacher commented that the focus on science had assisted their understanding of what the NSW model of pedagogy could look like which, in turn, assisted their understanding of what 'levels' students are working at and how they can be best supported. Another teacher commented that they now felt more aware of the need to provide for 'discovery learning' and 'child-centred learning' within the classroom. A Stage 1 teacher stated: 'It changed what I expected from children in other subjects as well.'

The process of action learning that the teachers engaged with has since been replicated in another professional learning project. While the focus of the new project is different (this time addressing the 'Working Mathematically' strand within the *Mathematics K-6 Syllabus*), the actual action learning process has remained the same. The distinct cycles of planning, development, implementation and critical reflection have been planned for this experience, beginning in Term 1, 2005.

### **Ways to Share Knowledge with Others**

The collected data clearly showed that structures had been put in place to share knowledge amongst the staff involved in the action learning process. The teachers were provided with time throughout the process to engage in professional conversation with the staff as a whole, and within their stage groups. One teacher made mention that they 'appreciated the discussion within an accepting environment'. Another teacher stated: 'I valued sharing opinions.' Analysis of the collected data from the semi-structured interviews conducted within stage teams clearly demonstrated that all the teachers felt that they had grown professionally throughout this process and, as one Stage 1 teacher stated: 'I felt more confident working as part of a team.'

The collection of science units, developed to support the teachers in planning science and technology learning experiences, provided evidence of the process and a reminder to the teachers of all they achieved during the project's duration. The teachers all commented that they were continuing to use and build upon these. Having a physical reminder of the professional learning experienced appeared to motivate and enthuse the teachers.

The staff's engagement with the action learning process for professional development has been consistently reported to the wider community. Research papers and conference presentations focusing on the project have been written and presented by the principal at conferences. Anecdotal evidence from these presentations has been relayed to the teachers by the principal.

## **Issues**

Analysis of the semi-structured focus interviews revealed some discussion centred on who could be included as 'experts' in future action learning projects within the school. While this 'expert' knowledge was identified as an important professional support need for the action learning team, there was some concern that new 'experts' may not meet the high precedent set by those 'experts' within the initial action learning project. The principal identified that selection of appropriate personnel was 'crucial' to the staff's acceptance and motivation within the process.

The process of evaluative inquiry was a worthwhile process for these teachers to engage with. The collected data demonstrated that many teachers found it useful to revisit what had occurred during the action learning project as a way to articulate the process and to identify and acknowledge the perceived enablers within this process. As the teachers engaged in reflection about this, they were able to articulate the process, identify the enablers and inhibitors of action learning within their school context, and review their own professional growth.

## **Conclusion**

The need to build in and plan for sustainability was recognised throughout the duration of the initial action learning project. Tea Tree Public School has since embarked on a new action learning project, again involving the whole staff on a curriculum focus. The replication of the action learning process in a new professional focus, provides evidence of sustainability and valuing of the action learning experience. Each action learning professional experience was initiated with the philosophical support of the principal, utilising considerable school resources to support the action learning experience. The additional time, resources and priority given to action learning experiences contributed to its success within this site.

The capabilities of the experience to incorporate all the teaching members employed within the school in the action learning process strengthens the profile of the experience and ensures full inclusion and involvement. The cycles of planning, development, implementation and critical reflection appeared to provide the teachers with a manageable structure to work within, which many have adopted in their subsequent planning. The continuing effects of the action learning experience, which the teachers articulated within the semi-structured interviews, are testament to the power of the action learning process within this school site. The key conditions for sustaining action learning in this school include the involvement of the whole staff, provision of time for planning and implementation, and incorporation of experts, all within a collaborative and supportive school culture.

## Attachment 1

# Tea Tree Public School Action Learning Project

### Research Questions:

- i What are the professional support needs, challenges and consequences for teachers who engage in action learning?
- ii What is the capacity of the school and the individual action learning team members to sustain and build professional learning and growth after the *Action learning for school teams* project was completed?
- iii To what extent has the action learning team been able to transfer knowledge to others in the school community?

### Interview Questions for Stage Meetings

1. What were the advantages of working in the project?  
Things to consider include:
  - Academic and consultant support
  - Time for planning
2. What difficulties (if any) did you experience working in the project?
3. How did the project help with ...?
  - Understanding the NSW Pedagogy Model?
  - Implementing the NSW Pedagogy Model?
  - Planning for teaching Science?
  - Providing opportunity to reflect on your own practice?
4. What impact has the project had ...?
  - On your teaching?
  - On student outcomes?
5. How has the project supported your professional learning?
  - Which elements have become 'embedded' within your professional thinking and your teaching practice?
6. How has the project contributed to a supportive school climate?
  - Communication amongst staff members?
  - Collaboration amongst staff?
  - Opportunities for mentoring?
7. What are the main differences between how you have previously planned your units and the units that you have produced throughout the project?
  - What are the notable differences?
  - What professional growth can you see?
  - What would you like to do next?
8. Any other comments?

# Valley View High School

## School Context

Valley View High School is a small Years 7–12 secondary school located some 200kms north-west of Sydney in the hills and valleys of the northern tablelands. The 390 students from a diverse range of social backgrounds, including some 22% with indigenous heritage, either reside in the town or travel from surrounding rural areas to school. Of the 40 teachers at the school, the majority have long experience in schools and there are a small number of early-career teachers. Valley View is a study school for the University of Newcastle's SIPA (*Systematic Implications of Pedagogical Action*) Project. This has been an important factor in focusing staff attention on quality teaching during Terms 3 and 4, 2004.

## Project Context

The original *Action learning for school teams* project at Valley View High School was focused on the learning of a small across-KLA team of five teachers, who constituted the quality teaching committee in the school. The group formed after a recommendation from an invited school review suggested increasing the emphasis on quality teaching in the school. The main focus of the original project was first to increase the understanding of the NSW quality teaching framework by the team members through discussion, coding, engagement, peer-pair planning, videoing and reflective discussion, and then to engage in individual programming by faculty to reflect the quality teaching elements.

## Plan for Sustainability

Since Term 1, 2004 the original team has been able to extend significantly the impact of their learning to other staff in all faculties. The intention was to have the original team meet to share their experience of programming, using the quality teaching elements; to engage other staff through faculty-based programming activity and through 'Within and Between School' (WIBS) activities after school; to inform staff volunteers about the quality teaching framework; to undertake some coding; and to engage them in examining how they could employ quality teaching in their own classroom practice.

Funds to support these activities were to be provided from the school's allocated professional learning funds. Other factors supporting such action learning in the school were perceived to be the willingness of staff to engage with quality teaching, and the supportive leadership of the principal and executive. They delegated ownership and responsibility to the team, while clearly recognising their activity as an important element of the professional development program, which itself was central to the school strategic plan.

## Method

The original team was concerned that after offering three WIBS after-school activities to introduce ideas of quality teaching there were a number of staff that needed to develop their understanding and engagement further. The team, with the help of the academic team member, decided that the focus of their evaluative inquiry would be a Concerns-Based Adoption Model (C-BAM) (Fuller et al., 1976)-type survey of all teaching staff.

Interviews by the academic team member also occurred with members of the project team and the principal.

### **Professional Support Needs, Challenges and Consequences of Engaging in Action Learning**

The main needs were release time from class so that team members could meet and continue their work, particularly planning the design and implementation of the survey. Release time, as in the first project round, was again difficult to find because of the challenge of finding appropriate and sufficient relief staff. Again, much of the activity occurred after school hours in team members' own time. Release was also increasingly difficult in Terms 3 and 4 because most of the team taught Year 12; a number were in relieving head teacher positions in Term 4; and a number were engaged in HSC marking.

All head teachers except one had attended WIBS activities and engaged with the quality teaching model and were positive about further work in their faculties. The remaining head teacher was a 'passive resister' who had not engaged at all with the model. Evaluation of the three WIBS activities by voluntary participants was unanimously positive, indicating intentions to use the quality teaching framework in planning and reflecting on teaching, and a willingness to engage further in deeper understanding of the framework. Eight participants also indicated a willingness to engage with others in their classrooms in peer-pair planning, teaching and observation/reflection. Lack of time, increasing busyness of teachers' working life, and a perceived lack of opportunity in syllabi for student choice and direction were the main barriers teachers reported to being able to implement the quality teaching elements in their classroom.

An additional focus group discussion conducted by the team leader with the principal, deputy and 6 head teachers indicated perceptions of increasing impact of the NSW quality teaching elements in programming and faculty professional conversations. While there was some concern from interviewees about how to relate quality teaching to the bigger picture and translate it into the classroom, there is a strong perception that it is a useful framework to stimulate reflection and be incorporated into programs.

Survey results (n=26) indicate that only 1/26 participants reported they have no interest in the NSW quality teaching elements. Further, responses indicate that there are three clear groups with specific professional needs related to the quality teaching framework. The first group, 13/26 are those who have a beginning knowledge of the NSW framework through staff meetings and are ready for what the team calls Phase 2 professional learning, i.e. continued engagement with the model through faculty and across-faculty discussion, stimulated by watching and coding of either project videos or ones recorded in the school. There is a second group of seven or more who have indicated a willingness to engage in working with a peer pair to plan, teach and observe lessons of each other. Finally, there is a third group, mainly comprising the original team, who are interested in working on the application of quality teaching elements to assessment. Such application will be facilitated through the experience of one of the original team, who is engaged in the coding of assessment tasks as part of the Newcastle SIPA research project.

Each of the original team members has organised to work with one of the three teams. Thus, engagement with the quality teaching model through different action learning processes has moved from the original team of five to now some 25 or 26 teachers, including the principal and all but one of the executive; a total of more than 50% of the teaching staff in the school.

## **Capacity to Sustain Action Learning**

As indicated above, action learning has been sustained within the original team, particularly in relation to the application of quality teaching elements to faculty programming, although much of this has occurred outside school hours, particularly during vacations. The opportunity to create time within school hours has been minimised because of the increasing level of in-school and out-of-school responsibilities, particularly during Term 4, 2004 by all team members and the difficulty of securing appropriate relief staff. Team members expressed regret concerning the relative loss of opportunity for team learning and sharing. Team members have provided opportunities for other staff to engage in action learning, however, through after-school WIBS activities. The success of these activities is expressed in both the evaluations and the responses to the staff survey.

Commitment to sustain future action learning as a strategy for professional learning in the school is very strong. This commitment is expressed by the principal and members of the executive, based partly on the expressed and observed experience of the members of the action learning team. The principal stated that the only effective forms of professional learning are those, like action learning, that are owned and directed by teachers themselves, who also have the professional right and responsibility to decide on their engagement with the professional learning ideas and opportunities presented. There is also unanimous commitment by team members to not only the power and effectiveness of action learning as a form of professional learning, based on their own experience, but also to lead and facilitate opportunities by other staff for such learning. In addition, results of the staff survey indicate that more than half the staff are willing to engage in further action learning.

There are strong indications that action learning in some form will continue with the staff of faculties represented by the original team members, particularly around programming and the inclusion of quality teaching elements into subject programs. This will be facilitated by the fact that most of the team members are now faculty heads. However, the capacity for wider across-faculty action learning will depend mainly on the opportunity to create time and opportunity for release, so that teams of teachers can plan, work, observe and reflect together. This, in turn, will depend on the funds available. While school professional learning funds have been allocated for action learning, both the principal and chair of the school professional development committee agree that the funds alone will be insufficient to undertake professional learning of all staff to the level desired. Further, release will depend heavily on the availability of suitable numbers of relief staff in the town. While learning opportunities outside school will also be possible, the principal, because of perceived difficulties of accountability, has decided that payment to staff for professional learning outside school hours will not be available.

## **Ways to Share Knowledge with Others**

Knowledge about quality learning and action learning have been shared with different groups of staff, using different strategies. A number of reports about quality teaching and the team's activities have been made at full staff meetings and staff development days. In addition, team members have worked within their own faculties, using their action learning experience, to provide opportunities for groups of faculty staff learning. The main action learning opportunities for other staff, however, have been the three WIBS evenings, using the same learning strategies as those developed by the original team.

Executive members of the original team have also engaged the school executive in a number of activities in their weekly meetings around ideas of quality teaching and action learning and how these can be used in their faculties. Members of the team have also given a number of presentations about action learning for quality teaching and their experiences outside the school to state, region and district conferences and to individual schools in the surrounding region.

## **Issues**

There was strong agreement from members of the action learning team that participation in the evaluative inquiry was worthwhile and beneficial. Participation provided opportunity and stimulus for reflection on previous experience and its impact and on other teachers. This resulted in the decision to gather data about teachers' further professional needs related to the quality teaching framework. In turn, this decision and the resultant planning resulted in learnt skills in designing an appropriate survey to capture teachers' concerns, as the basis for planning further professional development. The evaluative inquiry meant not only gathering data, but also proceeding to analyse and interpret it: 'Often, you collect some information but it just gets stored away and never analysed.' Finally, having to engage in the inquiry meant a reaffirmation of the time and opportunity of the team to work together.

## **Conclusion**

There are a number of important conclusions emerging from the experience of Valley View teachers in both the initial action learning project and the follow-up evaluative inquiry. First, is the realization that 'we can teach ourselves if we are willing to share our ideas and knowledge critically and collectively'. To maximise such learning, however, requires an attitude of willingness to accept responsibility for individual and collective professional learning and to be committed to the conviction that teaching is a learning profession and part of a teacher's responsibility is her/his own continuous professional learning.

Second, while developing skills, knowledge and experience of how to go about different forms of professional learning in teaching staff is important, even more critical is finding and creating time for professional learning to take place. At Valley View it is often impossible to release groups of teachers in school time because of a lack of sufficient appropriately qualified relief staff available at the same time, and inappropriate relief means lots of 'repair work' with the classes. This results in the necessity of having to pay for 'out of hours' professional development time. It is the advice of the principal and team leader that probably the school can just manage their program of planned future professional learning related to quality teaching within their allocated professional learning budget. However, this will only permit release of small groups of teachers each year and will not allow a more desired whole-school focus.

Valley View has been able to sustain the original impetus and increase its impact to a point where over half of the teaching staff, including principal and all executive except one, have now engaged in some manner with the NSW quality teaching model. What is important is that, unlike some other schools where the major focus has been on the development of a product or resources, at Valley View the focus of the action learning has been clearly on engagement with the NSW quality teaching model and its elements. Further, the successful experience of action learning as a powerful and effective form of teacher professional learning underpins a commitment by team members, executive and a

significant number of teaching staff to continue to employ it as a central strategy for teacher professional development.

# Wattle Technology High School

## School Context

Wattle Technology High School has, over its 50-year existence, moved from being a comprehensive school, to a boys-only school, and then to a coeducational technology school, with more than 800 students and a stable and experienced staff of 64 teachers. The school is close to a major regional city and beaches. The student body has a diverse make-up, with over 30 different cultures represented.

## Project Context

The project set out to improve, revitalise and change professional learning in the school. Up to this point, professional development in the school lacked direction and relied heavily on invited 'experts'. The action learning team (ALT), consisting of eight teachers from different KLAs and an academic partner went through a process of becoming familiar with the NSW model of pedagogy. This involved a series of workshops and presentations.

Teachers in the ALT reflected on and critically analysed their own teaching in terms of the NSW model of pedagogy. The eight teachers developed a thorough understanding of the dimensions and elements of the model and became 'experts' in leading across-school professional discussion about pedagogy. To support this, they developed units of work in each KLA that aligned with the model. Lessons were taught and videoed. The team then coded, critically analysed and discussed each others' lessons. Following this, the ALT members led discussions around quality teaching within their faculty areas. The team then planned to strengthen the links with the school's feeder primary schools by sharing experiences of the professional development model at the school development day in Term 3, 2004.

A DVD resource was produced by the team, which included footage of actual classroom lessons; the planning and evaluation by teachers and the academic partner; examples of students participating in quality lessons; and interviews with students and teachers not in the action learning team. An official launch, held on Public Education Day, was attended by the project manager of quality teaching and other officials from DET, parents and invited guests. The resource was given to all staff at a school development day and to all staff at feeder primary schools. On the day, small groups viewed sections of the DVD to encourage discussion around quality teaching.

## Plan for Sustainability

The intention of the project was to continue the focus on quality teaching on a number of levels that included:

- continuation of the action learning team and their role in professional development
- developing each members' own practice in relation to quality teaching
- involvement in the SIPA (*Systematic Implications of Pedagogical Action*) research project conducted by the University of Newcastle.

## **Method**

The school-based inquiry team decided to use the following five-phase methodology for the evaluative inquiry:

- Phase 1. The team leader conducted videoed focus group interviews with other action learning team members. (Attachment 1)
- Phase 2. Team members completed a reflection sheet. (Attachment 2)
- Phase 3. A questionnaire was completed by head teachers in the school. (Attachment 3)
- Phase 4. The team leader conducted videoed focus group interviews with Year 7 students. (Attachment 4)
- Phase 5. Documentary evidence of engagement of teachers with the school/education community was collected.

## **Professional Support Needs, Challenges and Consequences of Engaging in Action Learning**

The team leader videotaped interviews with six team members, conducted in two groups of three. The interview data indicated that the teachers perceived the action learning project to have had a number of benefits which included the development of: leadership skills; a shared understanding of problems and approaches; a common language for communication; teamwork; support; and reflection.

The team members felt that they were supported in the endeavour by other team members and received sufficient resources for the project. However, some felt some anxiety about the perception that they had been 'criticised by their peers' (even though this did not occur), and a lack of clarity surrounding the NSW model of pedagogy.

The project appeared to offer a number of drawbacks and challenges. Generally, these were time related, that is, not having enough time to plan lessons and fit in other commitments. For some, it was confronting to hear student feedback on their lessons. The major challenge appeared to be in the implementation of the model of pedagogy and convincing other colleagues to adopt it.

## **Capacity to Sustain Action Learning**

The action learning team continued beyond Term 1, 2004 with expansion into the faculties where action learning sub-groups were formed. The team continued to have a presence in staff development days. The teamwork continued with a sense of common goals, confidence, leadership and a willingness to share ideas around quality pedagogy. As a consequence of the project, the team members perceived that they learned to 'enjoy risk taking' and that the process revitalised their teaching, with one teacher commenting: 'Action learning respects teachers' professionalism.'

Data from the reflection sheet used in phase two indicated that the team continued to factor the content of the project into their daily teaching by: writing programs based on the model; transferring best practice to Years 8–12; and reflecting on and assessing programs against the model.

The school management plan for 2005 indicated that the ALT would be used as part of the overall approach to professional learning, and with a continuing focus on quality teaching. Head teachers would be responsible for implementing and programming for quality teaching of the new syllabuses (for every KLA 7–10). Input from the ALT members would continue to occur at executive meetings and through planning and implementing staff development days.

### **Ways to Share Knowledge with Others**

The Phase 2 reflection sheet responses indicated that the team members were accepted by other school staff as school leaders in the area of quality pedagogy. The team was able to engage other staff in developing an understanding of the model through: faculty discussions on program development; leading general staff room discussions; modifying and designing guidelines for Year 7 units; and providing a general framework for syllabus implementation.

In a survey of all head teachers in the school (Phase 3), it was apparent that the team was able to generate awareness, interest and discussion in each faculty and support program development. As a result, faculties implemented a number of initiatives that included: incorporating higher order thinking into lessons and assessment tasks; developing units based on quality teaching; investigating ways and means to write up quality teaching programs; developing a scope and sequence across HSIE, incorporating the quality teaching model. The DVD resource has been used by faculties as a reference point to promote discussion and reflection on classroom practice.

The head teachers viewed the action learning process as an effective model of professional development for teachers in their faculties. They noted that the process highlighted great role models and teamwork. One head teacher commented that he would have preferred more staff to be involved in the action learning team.

Phase 4 involved the team leader conducting videoed focus group interviews with 2 groups of Year 7 students: a group of four boys and a group of four girls. These students commented on the impact of the teaching of two units (Science and English) developed by the action learning team members. Their views indicated a perceived deficiency of 'significance' in the Science unit and a perception that all aspects of the model were covered equally in the English unit. Interestingly, later, when coding of the Science unit assessment tasks occurred, it was found that it had a high level of 'significance'. The interview data will be used by the Science and English teachers to assist their planning of future units of work.

A summary of presentations of the project to the educational community was developed. Presentations included a formal conference and DVD presentations to principals, secondary and primary teachers and university academics. The project is part of a larger research project being conducted at the University of Newcastle.

### **Issues**

One of the significant outputs of the project was the production of a DVD that was used for professional development with the school and feeder schools. The ALT found this approach so successful that they wanted to use videoed focus group interviews as the main research technique in eliciting teachers' and students' thoughts about the project.

One team member commented on using the video methodology, 'It is a powerful tool in challenging ideas, raising awareness and generating discussion.'

Team members believed that the inquiry process has built their capacity to research their own practice by providing them the opportunity to work as a team to collect and analyse data in a professional way. Team members also expressed the view that the evaluative inquiry had been worthwhile, enabling them to reflect on the activities that were undertaken and assisting future planning. The video process will be used by other staff in analysing their teaching and planning for new units of work. The results have provided useful insights into teachers' and students' perspectives and whether or not the criteria contained in the NSW model of pedagogy were addressed. One team member indicated that the process 'has also shown us a way to move forward for 2005 ... secure in the knowledge that we are building on what has gone before as opposed to heading off on a tangent'.

## **Conclusion**

The action learning team comprised experienced teachers from across the KLAs and the approaches they have taken throughout the project and its evaluation have resulted in benefits for the team members themselves, other staff in the school and students. As well as raising awareness about quality teaching approaches and providing a focus for continued professional development, the project also appears to have had an enabling influence on developing school leadership.

Team members have increased confidence in their own practice and are seen by their colleagues as leaders in the area of quality teaching. The team appears to have a continuing influence on policy and practice across the school. Although not specifically addressed in this study, it may be the case that the culture of professional learning in the school is moving from one that relied on 'advice from the outside expert' to one of 'we have the capability to identify our own problems and solve them in collaborative ways'.

## **Attachment 1**

### **Videoed Focus Group Interview Questions**

1. What benefits were gained by team members participating in the project?
2. What factors supported or inhibited your participation in the action learning project?
3. What drawbacks/challenges resulted from participation?
4. Has the team continued since Term 1? How?
5. What has encouraged the team to continue?
6. What have you learned about your own professional development?

**Attachment 2**

**Team Members' Reflection Sheet**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Faculty:** \_\_\_\_\_

1. Have you continued to use the QT model since Term 1, 2004? How?

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2. Have other teachers been involved? How?

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3. How have you conveyed your knowledge of the model to others in the school?

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**Attachment 3**

**Head Teachers' Questionnaire**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Faculty:** \_\_\_\_\_

1. What influence did the Action Learning project have on your faculty?

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2. As a result of this influence what has your faculty done to implement the Quality Teaching model?

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3. Has your faculty used the DVD? How?

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4. Do you think the action learning team approach is an effective model for professional development?

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## **Attachment 4**

### **Videod Focus Group Interview Questions with Year 7 Students**

Do you remember the unit of work you did in Science on the pollution project (separating the goo)?

1. How did the teacher go about teaching you this unit?
2. What did you do in class to help you complete the set task?
3. What activities in this unit of work did you find interesting and enjoyable – How did these help you to learn?
4. What didn't you like about this unit?

Do you remember the unit of work you did in English on Visual Literacy?

1. How did the teacher go about teaching you this unit?
2. What did you do in class to help you complete the set task?
3. What activities in this unit of work did you find interesting and enjoyable – How did these help you to learn?
4. What didn't you like about this unit?

Then as a group:

1. How do these two tasks compare with other tasks that you have done this year?
2. What other tasks/ units have you enjoyed and why?
3. When do you find it hard to get going on a piece of work or task? Why is that?

# Welcome Public School

## School Context

Welcome Public School is situated in western Sydney. The 12 classes are multi-staged with the 345 students grouped according to literacy needs. Forty-eight percent of students are from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB), with 35 different nationalities represented. School programs include reading recovery, parents as tutors, and peer tutoring. The school has a strong commitment to its community and values, learning with parents to support the needs of all students. The school motto is 'Learning Together'. Classes called 'learning teams' help focus school culture on making learning the school's highest priority. School practices demonstrate the importance of teamwork, particularly between students and between teachers, and professional learning is a key factor in the development of teacher knowledge, skill and understanding.

## Project Context

The *Action learning for school teams* project examined day-to-day practice, and the associated teaching and learning challenges focused on improving pedagogy in classrooms. Literacy was selected as the priority area. The following expected outcomes were identified:

For teachers to

1. develop an increased understanding of the three dimensions of the NSW Quality Teaching (QT) model through participation in full day, stage-team planning sessions and staff development afternoons
2. use the backward mapping strategy to plan quality learning experiences for students
3. develop planning and assessment documentation to reflect the dimensions and elements of the NSW QT model
4. maximise student learning experiences by implementing a daily, uninterrupted, two-hour literacy block
5. participate in negotiated classroom visits to support the process of professional learning.

The main professional learning strategies were staff meetings to develop understanding of the NSW model of pedagogy; coding lessons (those on the video resource and of a colleague); and collaborative planning sessions, using elements of quality teaching. Gathering evidence of professional learning and the achievement of the above outcomes involved open discussion about pedagogy, development of programs with targeted elements, and presentations to staff at the 'Celebration of Quality Teaching' day that involved teachers sharing their classroom experiences and student achievements. Of significance has been the changing composition of the school project team since the initial submission, with several teachers taking leave. This has disrupted some plans and interfered with the continuity of some activities.

## **Plan for Sustainability**

The final report from the *Action learning for school teams* project indicated that half a day would be allocated to planning to ‘identify focus outcomes, indicators and elements for Term 2’ to ‘ensure the continuation of the action learning process.’ In this report, it was recognised that not all teachers had engaged with the project at the same level and that teachers learn best if they see a purpose and relevance to the activities. There was recognition that the project needed to be jointly owned by all members of staff and that plans needed to be flexible.

Strategies that were identified as needing to be sustained included:

- continued half-day planning sessions – ‘time to plan means that teachers feel valued’
- use of backward mapping strategies in planning quality assessment tasks
- opportunities to observe peers, and for focused professional dialogue
- continued professional learning sessions, particularly for new staff members.

In addition, further refining of planning sheets, that incorporate the QT elements, and continued development of resources were recognised as strategies to refine and build towards further change and improvement in teachers’ practice. Plans to share strategies with other schools; to extend programming to KLAs other than English and Science; and to encourage buddy/mentor partnerships were also identified as desirable.

Several strategies were used to sustain professional learning after the initial project concluded. These included:

- continued fortnightly stage-team meetings, focused on QT with extended professional discussion time
- a focus on action learning principles of analysis, planning, discussion, action and reflection
- a whole-day ‘Celebration of Quality Teaching’, with staff members presenting evidence of quality teaching within their classrooms, using poster presentations, powerpoint presentations, or some other form as appropriate.

## **Method**

A survey was designed (see Attachment 1) to examine staff perceptions of the needs, challenges and consequences of engagement in the project. Eighteen of the twenty staff completed the survey. These included 12 class teachers, 5 support teachers, and the principal. In addition, four staff members were interviewed individually to explore the perceived capacity of the school to sustain the action learning process. The project team also explored this question in a focus group discussion. An audit of the school professional learning program and staff programs was also undertaken.

## **Professional Support Needs, Challenges and Consequences of Engaging in Action Learning**

The participants in the survey reported that the most valuable aspects of the action learning project and subsequent professional learning experiences included group discussions (89%); focusing on selected elements of QT for planning (78%); and collaborative planning at stage planning days (78%). While watching the QT videos was viewed as valuable by most teachers (72%), watching team members' lessons (44%), and casual observation and discussion with colleagues (50%), were viewed as valuable by fewer respondents. The focus in staff meetings on aspects of the QT model was considered valuable by 39% of staff. The data suggest that teachers value smaller group discussions and planning in stage groups. It is possible that whole-school staff meetings may not meet the needs of some staff members.

Few factors were identified as inhibiting participation in action learning, although having enough time was mentioned as a potential inhibiting factor by at least three staff members.

The survey also requested feedback on three aspects of the action learning project: collaborative stage planning; observing and coding colleagues; and the sharing session or Celebration Day. This question provided richer data about the three key strategies. Almost all teachers responded positively to each – only one did not comment on the first strategy, four on the second and two on the third. It was clear from the responses that the opportunity to share teaching and learning ideas was valued by the majority of teachers. This occurred through the Celebration Day as well as the collaborative stage planning sessions. Observing and coding lessons was acknowledged as valuable as this provided a model of implementation, supported the development of a shared understanding of the elements, and validated good teaching practice.

Teachers' responses to Question 4, ('What have you learned about yourself as a teacher and learner?') provided some evidence about the effect of the project on their understanding of classroom practice. Six respondents indicated that they were already implementing many of the QT elements, so the action learning project had affirmed their current practice.

Responses suggested that the QT model had provided a common professional language to describe quality teaching and had reinforced the need for explicit quality criteria in classrooms. The project had provided time for reflection and opportunities to try different teaching strategies. Several teachers acknowledged that they still had much to learn and would value ongoing professional learning experiences. As one teacher indicated: 'I still have a lot to learn, [and it is] interesting to try different strategies and approach tasks from a different viewpoint.' The following response combines the notions of recognition of current quality practice and the need for continued learning:

I've learned that I am doing a lot of good things but have a lot to learn. That I am really strong in implementing some elements but need to focus on areas I am not as comfortable with. It also gives us the opportunity for reflection and discussion. We are capable of getting many more ideas as a group than when we try to plan individually. QTP has also given us a vocabulary to use in discussions with our peers.

While six teachers (33%) recognised themselves as ongoing learners, 44% made no reference to themselves as a learner. Identified strategies for learning included

working with colleagues; trying out new ideas in the classroom; and reflecting on practice.

### **Capacity to Sustain Action Learning**

Nine members of staff, representing all stages and a range of roles in the school, were approached to participate in individual interviews and were given information about their purpose (see Attachment 2). However, only four either agreed, or were available, on the interview day. These included an Executive member from Stage 3, a Stage 1 teacher, an Early Stage 1 teacher, and a Support Teacher Learning Assistance. Two were from the school project team and the other two identified as being in the third stage of engagement with the project initiatives. For the three classroom teachers who were interviewed, implementation of the QT model had been achieved by selecting focus elements for planning lessons and units of work, and by using aspects of the model as a part of everyday practice. It was noted that it is difficult for support staff to implement the model, due to their role working with other teachers. To continue to implement QT, the teachers indicated that they planned to identify focus elements when programming; to continue stage planning; and to continue using the metalanguage of the model. For future planning, the interviewed teachers suggested that support needed to include:

- additional teaching ideas that focus on particular elements
- further sharing of teaching ideas and team planning
- visiting classrooms and working with ‘critical friends’
- more time for reflection, planning and discussion.

A general consensus was that the direction for whole-school planning should include further presentations of QT ideas, with constant promotion of the QT model.

Team members indicated that they needed to move to incorporating several elements from the QT model across more KLAs, and to familiarise themselves with future QT support documents (i.e. assessment). Further use of the action learning cycle would enable continued research on their own practice and provide potential for more collaboration between team members. Additional suggestions included:

- seeking support from SEA staff
- attending external professional learning activities
- exploring additional professional reading material
- investigating material on DET web sites
- initiating collaboration and sharing of experiences with other schools
- building networks of learners within and beyond the school community.

### **Ways to Share Knowledge with Others**

Several professional learning experiences have supported the implementation of the QT model and have sustained its implementation. An audit of the school’s professional learning activities for 2004 (see Attachment 3) indicated that the range of experiences included school development day meetings, stage team meetings, leadership team meetings and staff member presentations to teachers from other schools. The audit suggests that more staff members were becoming involved in presentations to other schools to share their experiences of implementing the QT model, as well as collaborative planning.

Ongoing stage team meetings, where planning units of work incorporated elements of the QT model, suggested that the action learning project is continuing to impact on teachers' planning and programming. Individual teachers have trialed a range of proformas to support the process of embedding the QT elements into programs. Typically, teachers list particular elements on their programs, that form the focus of learning experiences for students. For example, one program that was submitted by a teacher who was interviewed included higher-order thinking, student direction and knowledge integration as the focus elements for a unit of work on 'Places we know – The shops'. Each element was then followed with learning experiences to support the implementation of the element in the classroom.

One aspect of the Celebration Day that has permeated other classrooms is the 'student-led groups' initiative for reading that was presented by one of the school team members. Several teachers have now incorporated this strategy into their practice to focus on the student direction element. There also appeared to be evidence that explicit quality criteria and metalanguage had become a focus for at least some teachers.

## **Issues**

While the action learning team agreed that the quality teaching model had injected an energy and enthusiasm into teaching in the school, there were several issues to consider when planning ongoing professional learning.

### *1. Engaging teachers as learners*

While some members of staff view themselves as learners and acknowledge that there is much to learn from reading and discussing the QT model, others do not. Some of the latter group of teachers stated that they are successfully implementing the model and that it has reassured and valued them as teachers. This is a positive outcome but such a belief suggests that the planned professional learning experiences may confirm the worth of current practice and not necessarily encourage further reflection. In the surveys, most teachers acknowledged that they had learnt new ideas for teaching but did not acknowledge themselves as learners.

This raises several issues:

- How to encourage teachers to read and reflect on their practice
- How to promote discussions about teaching as a learning process
- How to support teachers in researching their practice
- How to promote a community of practice within the school, as well as with teachers from other schools who have shown considerable interest in the project.

## 2. *Supporting a greater level of self-reflection in a collegial atmosphere*

During the action learning project, staff members were encouraged to reflect on their practice after viewing and coding the videos. To support reflection and professional dialogue between teachers, they were invited to observe each other and to code the observed lessons. Few participated in this activity, possibly because they did not feel comfortable with this exercise. Little evidence exists that lesson observations have occurred since the initial activities in Term 1. While the action learning team members agreed that they continue to talk together about their teaching in relation to the QT model, it would appear that this has not been sustained with other groups of teachers.

## 3. *Encouraging staff-initiated professional learning*

Some staff members are willing to participate in professional learning experiences when they are organised for them. There is little evidence of other members of the school community taking the initiative to suggest or organise experiences. Ewing (2004, p. 1) identifies action learning as 'a means of collaborative workplace learning through which people learn with and from each other. An authentic problem or issue is identified by the team and, over time, the group seeks to find a resolution'. It would appear that the action learning team may have identified an issue to be resolved, but it may not be shared universally.

## 4. *Engaging in an evaluative inquiry to ascertain sustainability of professional learning*

All members of the action learning team agreed that the evaluative inquiry was a worthwhile vehicle for systematically gathering evidence to evaluate the sustainability of professional learning. The scaffold of the three main research questions provided a framework to explore particular sub-questions of interest in the school context. The use of an academic team member supported the process by providing advice and feedback on the data collected and the analysis undertaken.

## **Conclusion**

The evaluative inquiry has provided a method of critically examining the approaches adopted by the school to bring about a focus on quality teaching and learning through the NSW QT model, and whether these approaches have been able to sustain change beyond the project. The adopted approaches appeared to have provided a catalyst for conversations about pedagogy, but there is some evidence that this has not been sustained for all teachers.

There is strong evidence that members of the school team have been able to sustain their professional learning with ongoing dialogue and discussion, sharing of teaching approaches, presentations to teachers from other schools, and participation in the evaluative inquiry. There is some evidence that other members of the school community have continued to engage with the QT model by including particular elements in programs, sharing teaching ideas, and presentations to teachers from other schools. Changes to teaching staff have meant that not all teachers have participated in all learning experiences and there is a range of knowledge and understanding about the QT model. In order to challenge some of the issues identified in the previous section, several implications are presented and discussed.

1. *An examination of the core beliefs and values of the school*

Students are the first priority, with student-centred learning and high expectations central to the school's beliefs and values. It is time to revisit these core values in relation to the QT model. If the initial focus on action learning is to be sustained, more members of the school staff need to be involved in the identification of an 'authentic problem' and in seeking a resolution to the problem. Encouraging teachers to reflect on current practice will be a vehicle for examining what they believe about teaching and learning, and how those beliefs would be represented in practice.

2. *Continued focus on the QT model*

Further workshops need to be considered to maintain the momentum, or to 'maintain the rage', as was stated by one school team member. New staff members may need considerable support during 2005, depending on their experiences to date. Providing ongoing opportunities is critical to sustaining engagement and promoting teachers as learners. Continued negotiation of learning experiences that support teachers' needs is critical, with a goal of encouraging teacher-initiated professional learning, as well as self-directed learning.

The release of the assessment material for the QT model will provide an additional focus for engagement. This will enable further development of appropriate assessment tasks which can be used across stage teams.

3. *Development of a learning community and learning network*

One approach to developing a shared vision for the school community is to provide opportunities to discuss key issues; share knowledge and understanding; and learn together in small teams. This will be encouraged at the school level to further develop a 'learning community'. Teaming teachers so that they can develop collegial partnerships will be further explored during 2005, with the potential for team teaching, collaborative planning, and shared learning opportunities.

This is also possible between schools. A partnership already exists with two neighbouring primary schools. Further meetings could be arranged with a view to developing a 'learning network', with interested teachers from the three schools meeting to share ideas, develop collaborative teaching and learning experiences, and explore areas of interest.

4. *Sharing learning with the school community*

It was recognised by school team members that teachers can be the greatest advocates for their profession. It is time to project the professional learning culture to the school community so that they value what teachers are doing to support the learning of their children. Fostering and developing partnerships with parents as learners is desirable.

**Attachment 1**

**Evaluative Inquiry – Staff Survey**

Please answer the following questions regarding the evaluation of our involvement in the AGQTP Action Learning project.

1. Which of the following have you found valuable throughout the project?

Please tick all relevant factors

Using 'A Classroom Practice Guide' document	Collaborative planning and discussion of AGQTP at stage planning days
Using coding	Casual observation and discussion with colleagues
Watching AGQTP videos	Sharing session at WDPS school development day (term 2)
Group discussions	Professional development sessions at staff meetings relating to AGQTP
Watching lessons by team members	Other _____
Professional reading / research	_____
Focusing on selected elements when planning	
Planning proformas addressing quality teaching	

2. Have there been any factors that have inhibited your involvement in the AGQTP project?

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3. How were the following experiences beneficial for you:

Collaborative stage planning for 'quality teaching'	Observing and coding colleagues	Sharing Session on School Development Day
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

4. As a result of your involvement in the AGQTP project what have you learned about yourself as a teacher and a learner?

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Thank you for your valuable contribution.

## **Attachment 2**

### **Evaluative Inquiry – Staff Interview**

The research team is looking to identify how our school has sustained emphasis on quality teaching following our participation in the AGQTP Action Learning project.

As part of our school's evaluation, we have organized an interview with you on \_\_\_\_\_. The interview session will run for approximately half an hour and you will be released to participate in this process. The interview will be conducted by \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_ scribing notes about important points that you make throughout the discussion. The content of each interview will be kept confidential. No names will be attached to statements or staff proformas.

During the interview, you will be asked a range of open questions relating to your use of the NSW model of quality teaching.

Please think about the following points prior to the interview:

- ways you use quality teaching elements in your teaching
- ways you use quality teaching elements in your planning/programming
- any plans you have for continuing to use quality teaching elements
- support you may need to assist your use of the quality teaching elements
- whole school planning for professional learning.

We will be collecting samples of programming and planning proformas used by teachers so please bring along any that you have tried. You may also want to bring any student work samples that show evidence of your use of quality teaching elements.

Questions or concerns can be raised with any member of the School Inquiry Team.

### **Attachment 3**

## **Audit of Professional Learning Activities, 2004**

### TERM 1:

- School Development Day: Viewing of QT videos, coding of videos and group discussion of coding and videos
- Leadership team (Executive) meet to discuss whole school directions and to reflect on current QT implementation
- Stage Planning for Term 1 – Select Focus elements for Units of work, same elements for whole stage. Our academic partner attended these initial planning sessions
- Stage Planning for Term 2 – Select Focus elements
- Observed a colleague teaching, coded the lesson, and discussed the outcomes

### TERM 2:

- School Development Day: ‘Sharing Session’ –Staff Presentations celebrating the implementation of QT into classroom practice through Power Points, DVD presentations, work samples, photographs, overheads etc
- Stage Planning for Term 3 – Select Focus elements
- Karina Bettison presented at a staff meeting, discussing other schools’ directions in the QT project and helping us to reflect on ‘where to next’ for our school
- Leadership team (Executive) meet to discuss whole school directions and to reflect on current QT implementation

### TERM 3:

- Team Meeting – Stage based planning and sharing of quality teaching elements, planning and proformas (Weeks 3 or 5)
- Three staff members presented Power Point presentations on ‘Implementing Quality Teaching’ at the local Regional Executive Conference
- Nine staff members presented to staff at a nearby public school displaying their incorporation of quality teaching
- Leadership team (Executive) meet to discuss whole school directions and to reflect on current QT implementation
- Stage Planning for Term 4 – Select Focus elements

### TERM 4:

- Six staff members presented to Staff from another neighbouring public school regarding the implementation of QT and collaborative planning
- Leadership team (Executive) meet to discuss whole school directions and to reflect on current QT implementation
- Presentation made to staff linking Learning Modality activities to QT.

## SECTION 4.

### ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDIES

All case study schools were able to identify strategies used or proposed to sustain their professional learning to different extents during the period of the evaluative inquiry. While some schools emphasised the quality teaching framework, others focused on the action learning process. A third group were able to explore both the content of the NSW quality teaching model and the action learning process. It is important to remember, however, that all case study schools were volunteer schools. Thus it is likely that, first, they anticipated that they would be able to sustain professional learning and, second, they expected to achieve their intentions.

#### Factors Identified as Important in Sustaining Professional Learning through Action Learning

A number of factors that supported professional learning were identified to a greater or lesser extent in each case study school. These derived from the *workplace conditions* within each school and their historical and organizational contexts; from the *process* (action learning); and from the *content* for the projects (in this case, initially, the NSW quality teaching model, in relation to each teacher's practice in one or more AGQTP priority areas). These enabling factors are represented in the following diagram:

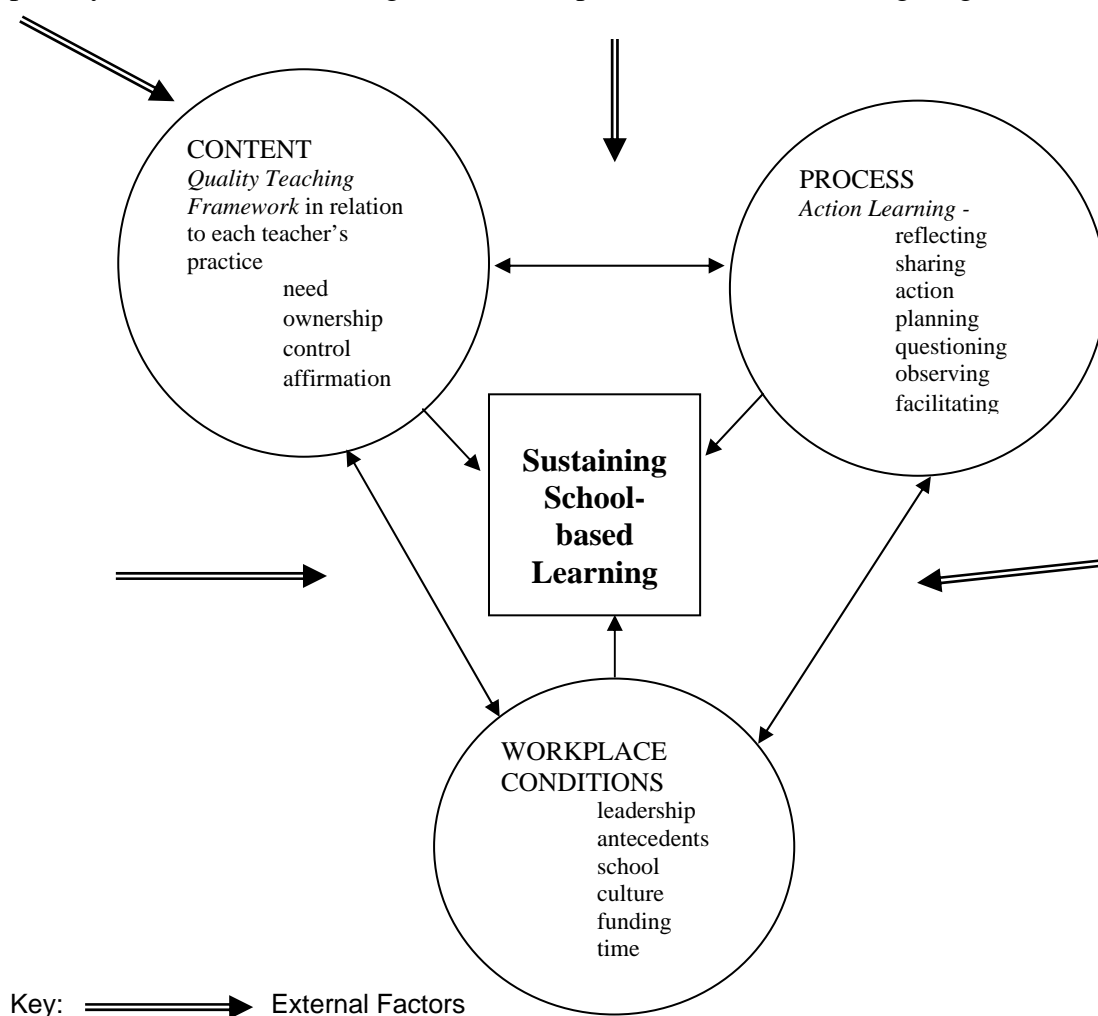


Figure 1: An emerging model for sustainable school-based professional learning

### *Workplace Conditions:*

In each school a number of enabling conditions were already present.

- **Antecedent conditions prior to the inquiry:**  
All schools had participated in previous projects associated with school change (e.g. 'Count Me In', 'Count Me in Too'; Disadvantaged Schools/Priority Schools Programs; Australian Schools Network; projects associated with a university). As a result of such experiences, participating teachers were accepting of the need for change in schools and significant numbers of staff, if not all staff, were prepared to try new ideas and innovations.
- **Elements of Professional Learning Communities established:**  
In all schools there were elements of professional learning communities (Hargreaves, 2003, Ewing, 2002, Hoban, 2002) established to varying degrees. In some schools, particularly secondary schools, these were only characteristic of some groups of staff. In other schools, particularly several of the primary schools, they were characteristic of all teaching staff. Such characteristics included a realization that teaching was a learning profession, and that each teacher has a professional responsibility to continue their own professional learning. Along with this realization was some commitment to the importance of teacher learning and to the provision of opportunities for such learning, including the understanding that processes of action learning provided such opportunities.

Associated with these ideas was an acceptance that problems arising in the school could best be addressed through collective learning, sharing and action, in which trusting colleagues and risking with them in collective work was essential. Such work was based on deliberate building of high levels of cooperation between teachers, where the goals of the collective learning and action were more important than individual desires, but where individual needs and emotions were recognized and addressed, in a climate of professional respect and constructive critique of ideas, not persons.

- **Attitudes of teaching staff to change:**  
In all the case study schools the general attitude of participating teaching staff was that change was a necessary and an essential ingredient of a healthy and effective school. While some schools did experience 'blockers', who did not want to engage in professional learning towards change, generally there was a significant number of staff who were prepared to trial new educational ideas and processes, particularly if they were able to see that such changes had the potential for improving student learning outcomes. To some extent, these attitudes had been fostered by the experiences of the school and staff before the commencement of the present action learning projects.
- **Integration into the organizational structures of the school:**  
In all schools professional learning projects were integral to the policies and structures of the school and, in some cases, had been for a number of years. In most cases this was manifested by inclusion of an explicit professional development program and opportunities for teacher professional learning being built into the school's development/strategic plan. In some cases such explicit recognition was also an element of stage team or faculty development plans.

- Leadership of the principal and executive:  
Active supportive leadership of the principal was central to the sustainability of the action learning in every school. In several cases this leadership was more direct and directive, in which the principal had a 'hands-on' role in the project, than others. In the majority of cases the principal delegated responsibility for and ownership of the action learning project to the teachers who formed the project team, although she/he had sometimes been the one who had selected or encouraged selection of team members. While actively and visibly supporting the work of the team, encouraging their risk taking and reinforcing this in school meeting contexts, the principal often largely left carriage of the project to the project team members.

*Process Factors:*

There were also a number of factors derived from the processes used by teams that enabled the action learning to be sustained.

- Knowledge and skills of the processes of action learning:  
Team members in the case study schools demonstrated different degrees of understanding of the nature and stages in action learning and skills in its implementation, generally derived from the first round of the AGQTP *Action learning for school teams* projects.
- Funds to release teachers from normal classroom teaching for planning, discussion and reflection:  
There is no doubt that, for all case study schools, funding to release teachers from normal classes, providing opportunities for teams to meet and work together, was one of the most important factors in sustaining action learning. These funds derived from different sources. The funds often came from the school's professional development allocation, or other funds available in the school. At times, particularly for schools in rural areas, it was difficult to find sufficient appropriately trained relief teachers. Meeting time outside school hours, therefore, became very important. In at least one school, time for stage team meetings was created by the principal and deputy teaching one stage of students once per week, thus releasing the teachers of that stage.

Release time from classroom teaching provided opportunities, sometimes with an academic partner, for peer pairs/teams to meet to learn, plan, implement, observe and reflect. It also provided teams in the evaluative inquiry with time to plan data gathering strategies, design instruments and questions, collate and analyse data, and evaluate and reflect on findings.

It should also be stated that teachers gave a great deal of their own time to engage in the action learning processes, over and above that provided by school funds.

- Leadership of the action learning team(s):  
There is no doubt that leadership within action learning teams was a vital factor in sustaining the action learning in case study schools. Leadership responsibilities included those of administrative arrangements related to organising time, locations and agendas for various meetings; essential communication between team members and between the team and other members of the executive and staff in the school; negotiations with evaluative inquiry project investigators and, in some cases, academic partners; ensuring that the team remained clearly directed and focused on their work; and maintaining a positive emotional climate within the team, building cohesion but, at the same time, allowing for individual viewpoints and constructive critique. In some cases, members of the original action learning team took on new team leadership roles, thus building organizational knowledge and capacity in case study schools.

*Content Factors:*

The activity, *Action learning for school teams*, focused on the need for schools to explore the NSW quality teaching framework (NSW DET, 2003). While schools did this in a range of ways, the *content* for the projects centred around this system priority, in relation to each teacher's practice in one or more AGQTP priority areas.

- Observable positive impact on student learning outcomes:  
An important factor in case study schools sustaining and extending action learning was the fact that teachers could see that the quality teaching framework and elements were directly related to the core business of their classrooms and the school. Further, from reports of those who had engaged with the elements, other teachers could see that the teaching of those teachers had become more effective and student learning outcomes and understanding in the relevant AGQTP priority area(s) had increased. Such experiences, heard and observed, acted as powerful motivators for other teachers to engage in the expanded action learning opportunities.
- Commitment by original team members to other teachers' opportunities for learning:  
In a number of cases, members of original action learning teams explicitly stated a felt commitment to not only share their experiences with other teachers, but to use their understandings and skills gained in the first round of the action learning project to provide opportunities for other staff to gain knowledge of quality teaching and develop skills related to action learning for professional development. This commitment was maintained even when original team members had experienced negative feedback and criticism from teachers who had not been part of the original project. This is an important factor when examining the sustainability of change in schools.

*Additional External Factors:*

There were also some factors external to the schools that were important in at least some of the case study schools.

- Acknowledgment derived from presentations to other schools and teachers:  
One of the factors that sustained original team members and motivated them to continue to expand action learning in their schools was the opportunity to share their experience and project with others. A large number of the original action learning teams in case study schools were invited to present at numerous regional, state or

national conferences or to other schools in their regions. The opportunity to share and publish their achievements and experiences was a significant factor in sustaining their work.

- **Academic partners:**  
Effective relationships with academic partners, either developed or continued in the original action learning project, were also an important factor for some teams in the extension of action learning in their school. In these cases, any payment to partners was generally provided from funds within the school because of the perceived benefit such partnerships afforded. However, these cases were more the exception than the rule and most case study schools sustained their action learning without the continuing assistance of an academic partner.
- **School community:**  
In at least three of the case study schools integrating the parents and community members into the extended action learning project was important. Parents in these schools were provided with information regarding quality teaching elements and how these were being developed in classrooms. They thus became not only partners with their children in their learning, but also strong advocates for providing professional learning opportunities for teachers in the school.

### **Challenges to Sustaining Action Learning:**

The factors listed above that were important in sustaining action learning were present in varying degrees in the case study schools. There was also a number of factors that challenged and, in some cases, restricted the level of sustainability of action learning processes.

- **Increasing busyness of teachers' working lives:**  
This evaluative inquiry examined how action learning was sustained during Terms 2, 3 and 4, 2004. In a number of instances, teams talked of the increasing demands on their work time as the year progressed. The most difficult term identified was, as might be expected, Term 4. Team members commented that the level of activity during this time slowed significantly because of the demand of end-of-year activities, particularly assessment and reporting. From all the evidence, it would appear that it is Terms 2 and 3 that are the most useful for release time for professional development. Notwithstanding, there was also the comment that having the obligation and responsibility of participating in the evaluative inquiry motivated teams to find time for their work, even with the increased impact of Term 4 activities. However, this issue underlines the importance of providing release time from normal teaching duties for teachers if professional learning and development effectiveness is to be optimized. This, in turn, has implications for levels of funding for teacher release.
- **Availability of appropriate teacher relief:**  
Related to the factor above is the issue of availability of sufficient appropriately trained relief teachers in the immediate vicinity of the school. This was a particular issue for schools in rural locations. There are two related issues. The first concerns the number of available relief teaching staff. This number directly affects the number of teachers that can be released at any one time. Second, is whether the available relief teachers are qualified in the required subject areas. This is more an issue for secondary than primary schools. As in the first round of action learning, there was feedback from rural schools that employing relief teachers not trained in the required

subject(s) often resulted in a great deal of time spent in both preparing for release and following-up after release. In some cases it was suggested that this extra time, and the level of concern in the teacher's mind during the release, was a greater cost than the benefit derived from the release. These issues were particularly pertinent for secondary teachers who were teaching examination classes (Years 10 and 12). Strategies, such as payment of teachers for work out of hours or on weekends, were also employed to try to overcome this difficulty but this, in turn, sometimes caused childcare problems.

- Negative attitudes of staff engendered by the experience of the first round action learning project:

In at least one case the current team leaders were dealing with the negative attitudes of staff towards action learning and quality teaching. A minority of these attitudes stemmed from a perceived lack of usefulness of the NSW quality teaching framework. Some negative attitudes were formed as a result of teachers' perceptions of the first round action learning project and the actions of team leaders and members.

Such attitudes often reflected an 'in group/out group' element and some jealousy concerning the extra resources available for the team to complete their action learning. This issue highlights the importance of effective communication and managing emerging conflicts, which often occur because of misperceptions during a process of school change. It also identifies that opportunity for volunteering in any change project does not necessarily overcome feelings and perceptions of jealousy and antagonism in those teachers not choosing to volunteer.

### **Benefits Gained from Participation in the Evaluative Inquiry:**

All teams in case study schools expressed perceived benefits that they had derived from participating in the evaluative inquiry.

- Opportunity to evaluate, reflect and develop future plans:  
Probably the most commonly expressed benefit was the time and opportunity that participating in the evaluative inquiry had provided for teams, and thus schools, to evaluate the goals, focus, organisation and processes of their action learning, and to plan future action learning processes as part of their whole-school development/strategic plan. For some schools, it was also an opportunity to explicitly identify the future professional needs of teachers in relation to quality teaching and develop plans to address these. While in a small number of case study schools, teachers who held negative attitudes about the first round of the quality teaching project and subsequent activity were identified, these teachers were in the minority and no case study school was negative about their participation in the action learning project.
- Developing skills and strategies for the collection and analysis of data:  
All teams in case study schools reported that participation in the evaluative inquiry had provided the opportunity to work with an investigator who assisted them in developing appropriate instruments to gather the information they had identified. In most cases these instruments included some form of survey/questionnaire and, in some cases, questions for focus group or individual interviews. Team members saw the development of these skills as useful for further data gathering in their schools. In addition, several school teams commented that often data is gathered but not analysed or not analysed to reveal deeper insights.

They suggested that being part of the evaluative inquiry and having an academic team member working with them meant that they had gained new skills in analyzing data, and insights into how data can be interpreted.

- Communicating the work of the action learning team:  
Most case study schools had been involved in making their projects more visible to the wider school community and, in fact, to the wider education community. This sharing of expertise was felt to be extremely valuable, both personally and professionally, by action learning team members.

## SECTION 5.

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several issues that emerge from the experience of investigating the sustainability of action learning in the case study schools. These issues emerge from the experience of the investigators and their interpretation of the data gathered.

- **Collegiality Vs ‘Contrived Collegiality’**  
One of the most frequently cited results of participation in the initial action learning project and what followed this during the remainder of 2004 was the level of collegiality that had formed within project teams and, in some cases, generally primary schools, across entire schools as a result of the action learning. Hargreaves (2003) recently reported Canadian research which demonstrated that, after a change project had ended, the levels of collegiality attained during the project lessened because there was no longer an explicit motivation to support its continuance. An interesting question is whether the experience noted by Hargreaves will characterise the case study schools in NSW. Already, in at least three schools, there are signs that the impetus to maintain team meetings is lessening. One reason given for this is the busyness of Term 4. It would be interesting to see if the frequency of team meetings, and thus opportunities to sustain levels of collegiality, is maintained or increases in early 2005 and beyond.
- **Funding for teacher learning**  
There is no doubt that the single most important factor in the ability of case study schools to sustain action learning was the provision of resources for release time of teachers. Teachers thus had control over resources to supplement their professional learning. One of the key issues will be the degree to which similar levels of funding can be made available, both within schools and from the system, for teacher learning. Indications from some team members and principals in case study schools is that, if all of the allocated school professional development funding was used to support action learning in the manner of the *Action learning for school teams* project, they could probably sustain their plans for professional development. However, these people comment that such a strategy would only allow release of groups of teachers each term and not permit professional learning time across the whole school as the action learning project funds provided.
- **A deeper understanding of the processes of action learning as a professional learning tool**  
In at least five of the case study schools it is evident that additional time needs to be spent in understanding the ongoing nature of the action learning process and its applicability to other professional learning issues. The original project focused on the use of action learning to enable teachers to engage with aspects of the NSW model of quality teaching. In some schools the quality teaching model continues to dominate the professional learning agenda and may do so for some time. While this is important and necessary, it will also be valuable to monitor whether action learning becomes a professional learning tool to investigate other school issues.

## Recommendations

- 5.1 **Because schools have different levels of understanding of the action learning process, there needs to be more emphasis on upskilling teachers and academic partners in using action learning as a tool for professional learning at the beginning of a project.**

(Although this has been addressed to some extent in the second phase AGQTP activity, *Action learning for school teams*, it is clear that more professional learning needs to be undertaken in this area.)

- 5.2 It was evident from the study that the momentum for professional learning slowed, both at school and system level after the funding for phase one of the project finished. **Ways need to be sought, both at school and system levels, to enable school teams to gain time for further planning, observation, discussion, action, reflection and evaluation. This includes both formal and informal professional learning conversations which could be incorporated into the professional learning component of school management plans.**
- 5.3 As demonstrated by the use of the NSW model of pedagogy, continuity is important in terms of the content of professional learning. Teachers may need several years to come to terms with this model in their own situations. In some cases, and for some teachers, the NSW model of pedagogy has become a conceptual framework for teachers to analyse their practice. It is therefore strongly recommended that **there needs to be continuity in the content focus (i.e. a curriculum initiative) for the school-based change projects.**
- 5.4 Schools have only just started on the process of understanding quality teaching, using action learning as a professional learning tool, and using it as a framework to enquire into current practices. Developing a culture of professional learning within a school can take several years. **A longitudinal evaluative inquiry over several years should be commenced to monitor sustainability and conditions for its effectiveness (workplace, process and content) over a longer time frame.**
- 5.5 It is clear that there are different combinations of the enabling conditions represented by the model for sustainability above. **Longitudinal research should particularly concentrate on those schools that have demonstrated all three enabling conditions (workplace, process and content), as examples of best practice.**
- 5.6 All schools found the evaluative process worthwhile as a scaffold for evaluating the sustainability of change and teacher learning. It provided teachers with support in terms of systematic data gathering, analysis and theorising about their own practice. It is therefore essential that **professional learning about systematic data gathering and analysis, promoting school-based teacher research, continue to be available to schools and be an important element of any further systemic school-based change.**

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## SECTION 6.

### APPENDICES

#### Appendix 1. Letter to Principals



The University of Wollongong



The University of Sydney

Dear Principal

Congratulations on being selected to be part of the *Evaluative Inquiry into the Sustainability of Professional Learning through School-based Action Learning*. The academic research team is Garry Hoban, Tony Herrington and Lisa Kervin from the University of Wollongong and Robyn Ewing, Judy Anderson and David Smith from the University of Sydney. One of these academics will work with your school team in your evaluative inquiry and will contact a school team member by phone in the first two weeks of Term 4. Please copy this letter for your team members as it is the research plan for conducting the inquiry.

#### Methodology

An *evaluative inquiry* is designed for ‘stakeholders and program participants to (i) collaboratively determine the strengths and weaknesses of various organizational programs, services, products, practices, processes, and systems, so that the organization may grow and develop; and (ii) to maintain a climate that supports the continuous learning of all employees’ (Preskill & Torres, 1999, p. 186). In this study the program is the *Action learning for school teams* project, the participants are two or three teachers from your school and the stakeholders are the academic research team from the University of Wollongong and the University of Sydney together with the NSWDET.

#### Relationship between the academic team and school team

A central feature of an evaluative inquiry is the collaborative relationship between the academic research team and the school inquiry team. One academic team member will be allocated to work with each school inquiry team in Term 4. The role of the school inquiry team is to conduct the research by gathering, analysing and interpreting evidence to address the three research questions. The role of the academic research team is to help the teachers to develop and conduct the evaluative inquiry and to give them support at critical points. The researcher, in negotiation with the school team, will be responsible for writing a case study for the final report.

#### Research framework

The purpose of the evaluative inquiry is to ascertain how engagement in the *Action learning for school teams* project might provide a platform to sustain teachers’ professional learning in schools. The research framework has four phases to address this purpose:

#### **Phase 1. Planning**

The academic research team leaders will prepare a research plan (this letter!) that explains the purpose, research framework, the three research questions, possible sub-questions, phases of the evaluative inquiry, roles of the academics and teachers, and timeframe for the research. This plan will be posted to the principal in each school who will need to copy and distribute it to members of the school inquiry team. The contact person from each school will be phoned to clarify the research framework, discuss the research plan and make arrangements for the first visit by the academic team member. Teachers need to complete the planning sheet (see Attachment 1) in preparation for the visit in phase 2.

### **Phase 2. Focusing the Inquiry**

An academic will visit each school to help the inquiry team to generate sub-questions and identify appropriate forms of evidence to address the three research questions. Individual teachers might like to be responsible for one question each or work on the questions collectively. The three research questions and possible sub-questions are:

1. What are the professional support needs, challenges and consequences for teachers who engage in action learning?
  - a. What factors supported or inhibited your participation in the action learning project?
  - b. What benefits were gained by team members participating in the project?  
What drawbacks/challenges resulted from participation?
  - c. What effect has the project had on team members' understanding of professional learning and classroom practice?
2. What is the capacity of the school and the individual action learning team members to sustain and build professional learning and growth after the *Action learning for school teams* project was completed?
  - a. Has the action learning team continued after Term 1 this year? If so what kinds of activities have been undertaken? Have others participated in the activities? Who?
  - b. What has encouraged the team to continue?
  - c. From the action learning experience, how has the school sustained and built upon teachers' professional learning?
  - d. What have the team members learned about their own professional development by being involved in the project?
3. To what extent has the action learning team been able to transfer knowledge to others in the school community?
  - a. Did the team members convey knowledge/skills/strategies developed from the project to others in the school? How?
  - b. Did other teachers in the school adopt/adapt the team approach? How?
  - c. What has been the influence on student learning in the school?

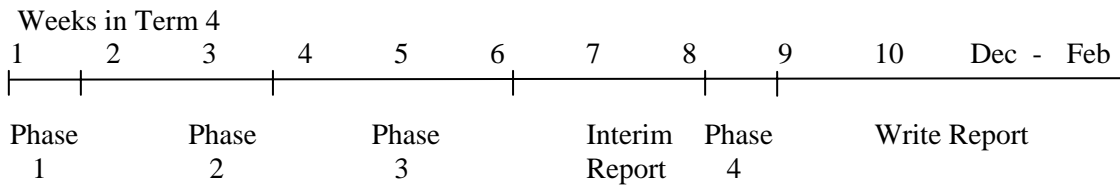
### **Phase 3. Carrying Out the Inquiry**

Teachers will gather evidence to address each research question in the context of their action learning. Teachers will present the data in a readable form and send it to the academic team member. The academic will help teachers to analyse the data and maintain contact with the allocated school via email or phone to assist at critical points. An interim report will be provided to DET based on initial analysis of data.

### **Phase 4. Reflection and Action**

Each school will be visited by an academic research member to help teachers reflect upon the analysis of the data and to tease out any relevant issues. One issue to be considered is whether this form of evaluative inquiry has been a worthwhile process and has their involvement built the teachers' capabilities to research practice in their own schools. The academic researcher will write the case study with the help of the teachers (see Attachment 2 for headings). A draft copy will be provided to each school to check the interpretations.

*Approximate Timeline*



We hope that this letter will be a guideline for your evaluative inquiry. The academic research team look forward to collaborating with you in Term 4.

Yours faithfully

Garry Hoban (02-42214450) and Robyn Ewing (02-93513846)  
Academic Research Team Leaders

## Appendix 2. Teachers' Planning Sheet

The purpose of the evaluative inquiry is to ascertain how engagement in the *Action learning for school teams* project might provide a platform to sustain teachers' professional learning in schools. The school inquiry team need to answer three research questions to address this purpose. Please think about possible sub-questions and forms of evidence before the first visit from the academic team member. Please read the 'Gathering Evidence from Practice' Readings booklet.

Research Question	Possible sub-questions	Possible forms of evidence
1. What are the professional support needs, challenges and consequences for teachers who engage in action learning?		
2. What is the capacity of the school and the individual action learning team members to sustain and build professional learning and growth after the project has been completed?		
3. To what extent has the action learning team been able to transfer knowledge to others in the school community?		

### Possible Forms of Evidence

Form of Evidence	Explanation
Coding sheet	Coding 1-5 for each element in the Model of Pedagogy
Survey	Make up your own survey
Focus group interview	Record a discussion with a small group targeting particular issues
Individual interview	Structured, semi-structured or conversational interview
Anecdotal reflection sheet	Sheet targeting elements of the Model of Pedagogy with space for anecdotal comments or interpretations
Student work	Examples of students' written reports or artefacts produced
Video	Video material relevant to the research questions
Photographs	Photographs relevant to the research questions
Units of work	Resources developed by teachers
Reflective journal	Teachers' informal journal entries
Student feedback charts	Charts identifying teaching and learning aspects of the Model of Pedagogy to give students a 'language' for feedback
Observation schedule	Checklist of teacher and student desirable behaviours

### Appendix 3. Case Study Headings

By the end of Term 4, a case study report (6–8 pages) will be prepared for each school by the academic team member in negotiation with the school inquiry team. Headings for the case report will include the following:

#### **School Context**

- type and size of school
- approximate setting
- any particular feature of the school

#### **Project Context**

- description of the original *Action learning for school teams* project in terms of what was attempted and achieved during Term 4, 2003 and Term 1 2004.

#### **Plan for Sustainability**

- intended plan for continued progress according to Final Report (April, 2004 section H) and Expression of Interest submitted. The school-based team is responsible for writing these first three sections (no more than a paragraph for each).

#### **Method and Research Questions**

The method may be treated separately or in the context of the research questions

- the methods for collecting evidence in relation to the three research questions and sub-questions
- presentation of evidence to answer the three research questions.

#### **Issues**

- any interesting contextual issues to be included
- one issue to be considered is whether this form of evaluative inquiry has been a worthwhile process and whether this process has built the teachers' capabilities to research practice in their own schools.

#### **Conclusion**

This section will address the purpose of the evaluative inquiry which is to ascertain how engagement in the *Action learning for school teams* project might provide a platform to sustain teachers' professional learning in schools. A brief synthesis and discussion of the answers to the research questions should be provided as well as implications.

Findings from the case studies will be collated and developed into an executive summary, together with conclusions and recommendations for the final report.