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Distributed Leadership as a Factor in and Outcome of Teacher Action Learning

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ABSTRACT: This paper reports an evaluation of Quality Teaching Action Learning (QTAL) projects conducted at New South Wales (NSW), Australia public (state) primary and secondary schools and explores how distributed leadership facilitated and was an outcome of the QTAL projects.

The evaluation encompassed all 50 projects at 82 NSW public schools, and nine of these schools were selected and visited for case study by members of the evaluation team. Data were provided through individual project progress reports, journals, interviews and case studies.

Schools used funding provided under the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program to release teams of teachers to undertake approved Quality Teaching Action Learning Projects using the NSW model of pedagogy as a framework. Projects were broadly successful in achieving their aims and distributed leadership and teacher learning were important factors in project planning, implementation, and success.

Projects resulted in enhanced distributed leadership and leadership capacity in the schools and provided a foundation for further professional learning and change.

Conditions facilitating and hindering action learning, distributed leadership, and educational change are highlighted.

Key Words: Action Learning, Distributed Leadership, Educational Change, Evaluation, Quality Teaching

This paper reports on an evaluation of Quality Teaching Action Learning (QTAL) projects coordinated by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET). Projects were funded and carried out as part of the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program (AGQTP).

The evaluation brief from the NSW DET was to investigate the conditions influencing teachers' implementation of an inquiry-based approach to action learning. The evaluation encompassed 50 individual projects involving 82 NSW public (state) primary and secondary schools that had successfully tendered for grants to investigate school-based and school-driven action learning using the framework provided by the NSW model of pedagogy (NSW DET, 2003). Within the overarching QTAL project, each school or group of schools pursued an individual project (e.g., gifted and talented programs, literacy, quality teaching in science, primary to secondary transition, etc.).

Overview of the Projects and the Evaluation

The common approach taken by schools was to use the funding provided to release small teams from some of their teaching duties to work together on an approved Quality Teaching Action Learning project with the assistance of a designated university academic partner, "expert" in the area of the project. Teams were usually volunteers and comprised a mixture of classroom teachers and those in formal leadership positions. Principals were not usually part of the teams, although they played important roles in developing and supporting the projects.

The evaluation (Aubusson, Brady, & Dinham, 2005) found that the QTAL projects undertaken by school teams as part of the AGQTP were successful both in promoting and utilizing action learning and in achieving their individual project aims. Being part of such teams led to the professional growth of those involved and this manifested in increased individual and collective leadership capacity, activity, and influence in the school and sometimes beyond.

Background

Action Learning

The evaluation was concerned with action learning, rather than its near relative, action research.

Action learning can be defined as a process through which people come together to learn from each other and share their experience (Dick, 1997). While this has always happened informally in organizations, we now tend to think of action learning as involving a team of people addressing a common task or problem. There may or may not be an external coach, critical friend, mentor, or facilitator, although this is increasingly the case.

Action research tends to be a more formal, structured approach to problem solving involving practitioners. Action learning has tended to be used more in the corporate sphere (see Mumford, 1995; Koo, 1999), while action research has been more commonly used in education and community settings (Dick, 1997). Increasingly, however, the two terms have blurred and are used interchangeably across a variety of settings. A related methodology is that of experiential learning which, as above, can be ad hoc or more formal, and with some form of external facilitation.

In action learning, action research, and experiential learning, a key aspect is that of a cycle of reflection and action. If improvement is desired, then the cycle tends to repeat, i.e., reflection-action-review-reflection-action, and so forth (see Dick, 1997). Each step informs subsequent steps, and ideally an upward cycle of improvement is set in motion. Action learning provides an appropriate and sustainable way of building the capacity of schools to improve practice. It is improvement-oriented, interactive, uses multiple methods and is characterized by validity, viewed as constructing, testing, sharing, and retesting exemplars of teaching (LaBoskey, 2004).

Some of the advantages of action learning are those of inclusiveness, flexibility, respect for the knowledge and experience of participants, involvement, collegiality, empowerment, and ownership. Challenges include building the capacity of schools to support action learning, maintaining commitment, developing effective leadership, creating productive partnership with mentors (where involved), and extending participation from small teams of key personnel to a whole school engagement with professional learning

The NSW Model of Pedagogy

The document Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools, incorporating the NSW model of pedagogy (NSW DET, 2003), provided an important rubric for action learning around improving pedagogy and for the evaluation reported here.

The model has been designed to be used by principals, school executive, and teachers "to lead and focus the work of the school community on improving teaching practice and hence student learning outcomes" (NSW DET, 2003, p. 3), and has been designed to be an aid and framework for reflection, action, and evaluation. The model includes three dimensions of pedagogy (p. 5):

* pedagogy that is fundamentally based on promoting high levels of intellectual quality;
* pedagogy that is soundly based on promoting a quality learning environment;
* pedagogy that develops and makes explicit to students the significance of their work.

"Intellectual quality" includes the elements of deep knowledge, deep understanding, problematic knowledge, higher-order thinking, metalanguage, and substantive communication.

"Quality learning environment" includes explicit quality criteria, engagement, high expectations, social support, students' self-regulation, and student direction.

"Significance" includes background knowledge, cultural knowledge, knowledge integration, inclusivity, connectedness and narrative (p. 9).

Since the introduction of the NSW model of pedagogy in 2003, anecdotal evidence suggests that some schools have fully engaged with and used the model to rethink and revitalize teaching and learning, while other schools have largely ignored it. Some teachers have welcomed the focus on pedagogy after years of more extraneous imposed management and accountability policies, while other teachers have disparaged the model as just another fad or imposition.

Distributed Leadership

There has been a subtle shift in conceptions of educational leadership in recent times. An earlier focus on educational administration and later management has turned more to leadership for teaching and learning. There has also been concern with an over-emphasis on the supposed attributes of the charismatic, heroic, "super leader," and the finding that such leaders can be "negatively associated with leadership sustainability" has called into question the wisdom of seeking out and appointing such leaders (Fullan, 2005, pp. 30-31).

Additionally, an earlier focus on formal leadership - especially the principal - has broadened to consider the influence of other school leaders and teachers, i.e., distributed (or distributive) leadership (Dinham, 2005a; Harris, 2004, p. 1). Although the concept of distributed leadership can be traced back to social psychology in the 1950s, it is only in the last decade or so that the concept has received widespread prominence and attention (Gronn, 2002, p. 653).

These changes in how educational leadership is conceived and enacted reflect a number of realities: that teaching and learning should be the prime focus of the school; that principals cannot bear all the burden of school leadership due to increasing pressures and demands being placed upon themselves and schools, and that the contribution to education of distributed leadership has tended to be overlooked or undervalued (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Gronn, 2002, p. 654).

There is also the issue of leadership succession, especially when leaders who have attempted to keep leadership power largely to themselves depart (Lambert, 1998, p. 10; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004, p. 8). Importantly, there is also recognition that there is unreleased and unrealized leadership potential and capacity for improvement residing in educational organizations (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002, pp. 3-16; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Gronn (2002, pp. 654-660) considers the multiple meanings of distributed leadership, which fundamentally fall into two groups, the first seeing distributed leadership as essentially additive (more leaders, spread leadership) and the second more holistic, including all forms of collaboration and participation. Rather than spreading existing leadership across more people, an holistic view of distributed leadership is concerned more with the synergies that can occur when people come together to work, plan, learn, and act, thus generating further leadership capacity within the individual and the organization.
Distributed leadership, including teacher leadership (see also delegated leadership, democratic leadership, shared leadership, dispersed leadership, Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003, p. 4) is now a major aspect of and influence upon constructs of educational leadership (Duignan & Bezzina, 2006), although as Harris (2005, p. 170) has noted, as well as enthusiasm for the perceived benefits of the concept, "we urgently need contemporary, fine-grained studies of distributed leadership practice ... without the associated empirical base it is in danger of becoming yet another abstract leadership theory." York-Barr and Duke (2004) concur: "there is little empirical evidence to support [teacher leadership's] effects". However York-Barr and Duke are optimistic about the potential for educational improvement through teacher leadership "despite being thwarted by centuries-old structures and conditions of schools that resist change" (p. 292).

Leadership and Student Achievement

The ultimate challenge for all educational leaders is to make things happen and improve in the classroom. While there is little doubt of the influence of the individual teacher on student achievement (Hattie, 2002, 2003; Rowe, 2003), leadership has been shown to influence what happens in the classroom through a variety of ways (see Mulford, 2006). A recent study of 38

government secondary schools in NSW where "exceptional" educational outcomes were thought to be occurring (Dinham, 2005b, p. 343) found that leadership (principal, other executive and teacher leadership), influenced student outcomes through:

* A central focus on students and their learning;
* Teacher learning, responsibility, trust;
* External awareness, engagement;
* Bias towards innovation, action;
* Student support, common purpose and collaboration;
* Personal qualities and relationships;
* Vision, expectations, culture of success.

In the above study, leadership - both principal and distributed - created the climate and conditions where teachers could teach and students could learn. Further, those in formal leadership positions, particularly principals, exercised leadership that resulted in others being encouraged and supported to develop and exercise their own leadership. Trust, sharing of power, giving people discretionary space, collegiality, and mutual respect were important elements in this process.
Distributed leadership is particularly important in larger schools that tend to be fragmented or broken into "silos." Both size and fragmentation tend to militate against the effectiveness and reach of a central leader. In the schools achieving exceptional outcomes, it was found that leadership capacity was developed and exercised by teams and functional groupings (i.e., faculties, and other teams and groups) through whole-school programs and initiatives. Effective leaders were found to have the capacity to identify, develop and release the leadership capacity of others, for the benefit of all (Dinham, 2005b).

In reviewing the literature on distributed leadership and teacher leadership, Harris (2004, pp. 6-7) identifies "common messages about ways in which teacher leadership and distributed leadership are enhanced and supported:

* 'time needs to be set aside for professional development and collaborative work between teachers ...';
* 'teacher leaders need opportunities for continuous professional development in order to develop their role ...';
* 'The success or otherwise of teacher leadership within a school is heavily influenced by interpersonal factors and relationships with other teachers and the school management team ... The ability of teacher leaders to influence colleagues and to develop productive relations with school management, who may in some cases feel threatened by teacher taking on leadership is therefore important ...';
* 'Overcoming these difficulties will require a combination of strong interpersonal skills on the part of the teacher leader and changes to the school culture that encourage change and leadership from teachers'.

The above messages resonate strongly with the findings of the Quality Teaching Action Learning evaluation reported in this paper.

The Study

A research team from the University of Technology Sydney and the University of Wollongong, with support from NSW DET staff, conducted the evaluation of the Quality Teaching Action Learning project. Schools had been invited to apply for AGQTP funding and 50 projects involving 82 schools were successful in having their projects - which had to meet both AGQTP and DET guidelines - approved.

Method

The method used in the evaluation progressed through six phases:

Phase 1. Planning and Design. August 2004 - September 2004.

This phase involved liaison between the evaluators and DET personnel; design of methodology (questionnaires, focus groups, mini-journals); and the recruitment and training of research assistants.

Phase 2. Preliminary Research. September 2004 - December 2004.

This phase involved the collection of demographic, personal, and professional data from all participating schools; analysis of the 50 successful school applications representing 82 schools; selection of nine case study schools; and analysis of the first progress reports from all participating schools.

Phase 3. Initial Case Study Research. January 2005 - March 2005.

This phase involved the first on-site collection of data from the nine case schools; the initial collection of mini-journals from the case schools; and analysis of school policies, meeting minutes, and resources relating to school projects.

Phase 4. Mid Term Review. April 2005 - May 2005.

This phase involved evaluator sharing of aggregated data; analysis of second progress reports from 50 schools; and the collection of data at the DET mid-progress sharing conference where representatives of all 50 QTAL project teams came together.

Phase 5. Final Case Study Research. June 2005 - July 2005.

This phase involved the second collection of data from the nine case study schools; the second collection of mini-journals; the preparation of the case studies and evaluator synthesis of common insights; the analysis of final school progress reports; and further examination of relevant school documents.

Phase 6. Validation and Analysis. August 2005 - October 2005.

This phase involved the content analysis of the action learning project reports and the writing and submission of the report to the NSW DET.

Findings of the Evaluation

Findings from the various data sources were generally consistent. It needs to be noted that this is one of the most successful programs with which the evaluators have been associated. Not all evaluations report such positive findings.

Broad findings of the evaluation are summarized below. The final report (Aubusson, et al., 2005) contains full details on methodology, findings and recommendations for the QTAL project.

Following the broad findings, the focus turns to the roles of teacher learning and distributed leadership in the projects.

Broad Findings from the Evaluation.

1. Successful projects were built upon a genuine, recognized need in the school(s).
2. Successful projects had clear, agreed, achievable, and suitable goals.
3. Support from the principal (and other leaders) was essential in project success.
4. A credible, suitable leader for the project was also vital.
5. Successful projects were characterized by effective teams and team building.
6. Schools found it difficult to start and to build momentum.
7. It was important to maintain communication with all school staff about the school's project.
8. Academic (university) partners provided valuable conceptual and theoretical background and assisted with framing, implementing, and evaluating projects.
9. Teacher release time was a major factor in project success.
10. Schools found the NSW model of pedagogy (Quality Teaching) a useful rubric.
11. The most successful schools considered long term sustainability of the projects from the start.
12. Overall there were strong indications that projects were successful, but evidence of student outcomes was inevitably lacking given the time frame.
13. There was increased although still limited sharing of the successes of school-based initiatives with other schools.

14. Schools and individuals valued and benefited from the sharing conferences which brought project teams and facilitators together.
15. Distributed leadership was both a major factor in the success and a significant outcome of teachers' action learning.

Distributed Leadership and the Study Findings

The QTAL evaluation found that "Support from the principal (and other leaders) is essential. ... A credible, suitable leader for the project is vital. ... Successful projects were characterized by effective teams and team building. ... [and] Distributed leadership was both a factor in the success and an outcome of action learning."

The opportunity to work in teams and how teams were empowered and supported provided the opportunity for the development of distributed leadership, a key aspect of project success. It was evident that team members grew in expertise, confidence, and influence during the projects. Both individual leadership capacity and that of their school were enhanced as a result of project participation.

Case study comments included:

Leadership is more distributed with teachers taking more responsibility for their professional learning and increasing their contribution across the school - 'leadership is more spread now, more pedagogic thought ... more receptive' [Principal] (Red Gum Primary).1

Project Teams: Formation and Leadership

The usual scenario in the schools taking part in the 50 projects was for the school to have previously identified an area of need, and to have completed some prior development on this. The AGQTP and the QTAL project provided the means to address this need in a more systematic, in-depth way. A number of schools described the timing of the QTAL project as "fortuitous ... it came at the right time."

Typically, it was the Principal, with a few other staff, who developed the proposal for funding. Once funding was granted, principals handed over project direction to a project leader, with the Principal acting as an advisor for the duration of the project. The case study report for Iron Bark High noted:

The Principal of the secondary school said she was 'involved in all stages although [the project leader/deputy principal] was the driver ... Distributed leadership was enhanced through the project, which had 'spread leadership across faculties ... staff are taking on leadership roles.'

Sometimes the project leader was a member of the school executive team and at other times a classroom teacher. The latter was more common in primary schools.

A small team worked with the project leader and team members were usually volunteers with prior experience and/or interest in the substance of the project.

Most project teams comprised both teachers and school executive (promoted teachers), but this does not appear to have resulted in problems of inequity. For example, the experience at Finch Primary School was that:

Initially some members of the group were fearful of the workload and were concerned that the executive members of the group might act as 'supervisors.' Even though the eight members included four members of the school executive, the group did not have a 'supervisory' feel. All group members found the whole experience non-threatening.

The case study report for another school noted:

The support from school leaders for the project, especially the Principal and project coordinator was seen as essential. The project leader was described as: 'constantly actively involved' and 'a big lynch pin but knew how to distribute leadership' (Iron

Bark High).

Principals had significant influence over composition of project teams without directing teachers to take part, although in several cases principals confided how they induced potentially negative or obstructive teachers to be part of the teams. The case study report for Wollemi Primary School noted:

Some teachers were invited onto the team to provide an opportunity for building leadership expertise rather than because of a special commitment to the project or perceived leadership qualities. In this way, it was hoped [by the co-leaders] that the QTAL project could contribute to building long-term leadership capacity of the school. In this distributed leadership model, each member of the QTAL leadership team would plan the project's progress determining what actions to take, what evidence to collect and analyzing this evidence to determine further actions.

Project teams spent time prior to and in early stages of the project meeting and planning to formulate the goals for their individual project. These conversations were important in framing and directing projects, although in a minority of cases, goals proved overly ambitious and needed to be scaled down due to the limited time frame. However, things did not always run smoothly, as the above report noted:

Members of the QTAL leadership team confided that at least two members of the initial project team were reluctant members and did not develop the enthusiasm or leadership qualities needed to promote and lead the project within their stage [grade/year] groups. However, both left the school during the project and their replacements in the leadership group proved more productive.

Typically, the project leader was partly released from teaching responsibilities during the project to work with other staff and the university academic partner and to attend planning and sharing conferences associated with the QTAL project.
Project leaders assumed a higher profile within, and in some cases outside their schools, than previously. They worked with members of the project team drawn from across the school, and in some cases with teachers engaged with the project from other schools. The case study report for Bilby Primary noted the importance of committed leadership from the project leader:

The ICT [Information Communication Technology] teacher 'knew where the school needed to go; she was really committed to it'. She was described by a team member as 'our guiding light.'

In citing conditions for the success of the project at Wollemi Primary, the evaluation team found as major factors:

[The] Established strong leadership team who developed their expertise in leadership, Action Learning, the NSW model of pedagogy and mathematics teaching. . . Leadership of the two assistant principals who had experienced similar projects, were confident, well respected and 'had clout' with both staff and the executive. . . Strong sense of commitment, shared responsibility and mutual support initially between the two executive leaders, which later developed more widely among the majority of the leadership group.

In interviews at the case study schools, principals recounted how they had selected project leaders both on the basis of their leadership skills, and on their potential for leadership.

Over all, it was apparent that project leaders had grown into the role, gaining leadership skills, experience and confidence. It was also apparent that members of project teams also grew in their leadership capacity during the course of projects, particularly those not in formal leadership positions.

Clearly, the project leaders, with support from their principals, led their teams well, with collaboration and teamwork being essential factors in the success of the projects and in connecting the projects with their colleagues in the rest of the school.

Collaboration and Professional Dialogue

Increased collaboration and communication among teachers was reported as an outcome of QTAL projects by the majority of teams (30, 60%). This trend was evident from reports at all stages. Many teams (28, 56%) reported the value of shared professional dialogue regarding teaching, often noticeable in faculty rooms, as a replacement for discussion about lesson

content or student behavior. Comments were often enthusiastic and illustrated the positive nature of the dialogue, for example:

What worked was the real teamwork and collaboration within the executive and between staff members that has generated professional discussion and the ability to try new ways of doing things' (Kangaroo High School).

Faculties were seen to be talking more and working more closely together: 'Staff resistant to change are now getting up and sharing.' A dialogue about teaching and learning has developed and people from different faculties are now talking and sharing, whereas they were 'their own cells in the past.' There is more understanding of secondary strategies in stage 3 [primary grades 5-6] and of primary strategies in stage 4 [secondary grades 7-8] (Quotes from Principal, Iron Bark High).

The case study for Quoll High School reports that an outcome of successful team building was:

Extensive teacher learning and teacher growth in risk taking and in confidence. Teachers who felt very hesitant about ICT in the classroom have developed new programs, which they are trialing, incorporating ICT and QT principles. ... These teachers have learnt new skills with the technology, and are using a greater range of resources.

Team building and distributed leadership provided a critical mass for change. The case study report for Iron Bark High noted:

The view was that there is 'a critical mass now, momentum.' A teacher stated it was 'a highlight of my career ... so positive ... I have learnt so much.' Teachers were 'enthusiastic, everyone likes it because it worked ... agreed to do it, really enjoyed it, understood it, feel confident, even people teaching for years ... feedback, reaffirmation, reassurance ... re-enthused some teachers.'

Empowerment, Learning and Growth

An important aspect of the projects was their empowering nature. Teachers were given time, space, guidance and resources to engage in action learning. Rather than being imposed from above, projects grew from within and staff developed professionally through the success of the projects. A number of teams (10, 20%) noted an increase in teacher confidence in teaching a new content area where this was the project focus. For example the Egret Primary school team reported:

Staff have become more aware and have a greater understanding of science and technology and recent documentation. Teachers are more confident and willing to teach science and technology and the collaborative planning of units had increased ... Staff generally enjoy teaching science and technology, as compared to not enjoying it earlier.

The case study report for Cedar High noted:

The project has been a very effective professional learning activity for those teachers involved. It has 'renewed a lot of personal interest.' It has 'empowered the school and teachers ... provided resources,' and 'provided time and a framework for reflection on teaching and collecting data.' ... Teachers are more confident and assertive in their professional learning. They 'are increasingly using the language' of QT.

Selection as project leaders enabled these people to develop and demonstrate their leadership expertise, so much so that some were noticed for the first time and subsequently offered other leadership opportunities. The case study report for Red Gum Primary noted:

A number of those interviewed commented how the project leader had grown in confidence and leadership capacity during the process. ... The leadership, drive and enthusiasm of the project leader before, during and after the project and her availability to staff was seen as essential - 'Without [her], it was not a viable option ... one person to drive was a major factor ... needed to keep pushing in early stages.'2

Academic (university) partners played an important role in the professional learning and growth that occurred. In some cases academic partners had an existing relationship with the school but in most cases they were appointed to a school or group of schools following project approval. There was an attempt to match the expertise of the academic partner to the individual school

project. By common consensus academic partners performed a valuable role in refining projects and in project implementation. School staff tended to lack research and evaluation skills and academic partners were particularly helpful in these areas. School staff in the more remote parts of the state expressed the view that they would have liked more contact with their academic partner.

The NSW model of pedagogy introduced in 2003 has proven a useful framework for teachers to reflect on and improve teaching and learning. The fact that it is common to all public schools in the state from K-12 has meant that teachers have a common framework and language to discuss pedagogy. All schools involved with the QTAL projects reported a heightened awareness of pedagogy and increased professional learning and discussion flowing from the use of the model and its application to the projects.

Time, Space, Control, and Community

A major factor in the success of the school projects was the funding which released team members from some of their teaching. This enabled team members to meet with staff from other faculties and schools, to attend planning meetings and to present and share at conferences.

One of the main outcomes made possible by a release from face-to-face teaching was the building of community - within teams, within schools, or among schools in cluster projects. Common consensus was that such professional interaction and learning is very difficult in the day-to-day operation of a school.

Some comments from case study reports included:

Action learning thrives in a high school setting through team teaching. The collaborative nature of action learning is lost when teaching is independent and only reflections, rather than experiences, are shared (Dragon High).

The collaborative approach was embraced enthusiastically by all, and it proved to be the catalyst for many other aspects of the project - such as peer mentoring, group planning sessions and collaborative classroom observations. Collaboration seems to have built a sense of team spirit at Cicada and this in turn led teachers to bond in a way they would not have experienced otherwise. The ability of staff from various schools to have time to meet, reflect and carry out stage based planning together has been one of the highlights of this project (Cicada Primary).

In accounting for the success of the action learning project at Banksia (Special School), the evaluation team noted the significance of:

Dispersed leadership with choice and control given to teachers. Each team determined 'its own direction' and responsibility for it. They were enthusiastic about their projects.

These comments illustrate the enjoyment that teachers derived from their ability to come and work together. This coming together fostered new ideas and created a supportive atmosphere that encouraged the risk taking and shared learning that was an evident in Quality Teaching Action Learning projects.

Thus it can be argued that the collaboration that characterizes action learning contributes, in a fundamental way, to its effectiveness as a means of individual professional learning and the development of learning communities.

The story of one project can be used to illustrate the often complex journey toward effective community. Toad Primary School is an example of a school that ultimately achieved a great deal, but felt that obstacles had been encountered which had to be overcome. One problem had been the breadth of the initial project aims; another was that some teachers did not want to be included in the project. This team found the timelines difficult to adhere to, and often had the feeling that they were struggling. It was only when they reviewed the project that "the evidence revealed just how far we have come in terms of quality teaching and how our practice has improved as a result of this project" (team member).

The way that the Quality Teaching Action Learning projects were instigated allowed the teachers involved to take responsibility

for their own professional learning. This was regarded as a strength of the QTAL project by a number of teams. For example the Seagull Primary School team concluded that:

Action learning proved to be a successful mode of delivery for teacher professional development as it allowed for individual teacher needs, and was driven by the individuals involved. It enabled teachers to be actively involved in their own learning and it wasn't something done to them but rather something they had ownership of and could control.

The team at Blue Wren Primary School suggested that this ownership is essential as:

Schools change when individuals change and improve their professional practice. The combined use of the quality teaching lesson plan with the observation guide and follow up discussions and personal reflection had an impact on changing individual teaching practices. School change is a slow and incremental process; action learning is an effective agent for change since those involved in the research have ownership of their professional development.

The sharing conferences where representatives of the 50 QTAL project teams came together provided a vehicle for sharing, affirmation, and further leadership development. Project leaders and team members recounted with some pride how they had made presentations at these conferences, something they had not experienced before. The sharing of a project at a QTAL conference through a team presentation was described as "outstanding" by staff at one school (Iron Bark High) while the case study report for Peppermint Grove Senior College noted:

The two NSW DET run conferences provided a forum for hearing what other schools were doing, and provided the opportunity to showcase their own achievements. One teacher, with a certain concealed glee, reported on how the team 'gave our workshops as though the principals [in the audience] were class members.'

Beginning, Building Momentum, Communication, and Sustainability

Some teams had prior experience with action research and action learning but most did not. Framing projects, agreeing on goals and determining strategies were important issues that took some time. There was also trepidation about beginning the projects. The time taken to reach the take-off point varied from a week to a month or more. One team member noted that "if we had planned everything, we wouldn't have started," the implication being that it is preferable to begin than to wait until all details are determined.

It became apparent from the evaluation data how important it is to maintain communication with other staff. The literature on educational change stresses the need to clearly communicate to those not directly involved about a change project and its progress in order to build support and overcome "the culture of resistance" (Evans, 1996, pp. 40-51).

The fact that in all projects staff were released from teaching duties at certain times provoked some negative reactions from other staff and in a few cases, parents, who did not understand why teachers couldn't engage in such learning and planning after hours. Team members also expressed disquiet and even guilt over the disruption to their classes caused by the employment of replacement teachers.

Sharing small successes and the progress of the projects was important both in keeping teams energized and in overcoming negativity from those not directly involved. This is essential if the projects are to be sustainable and to spread across the school.

Because of the scope of the projects, - in effect, half a school year - the majority of principals and teams had identified ways to continue the work of project teams beyond this time frame. Some principals had arranged to use school funds to continue to support teams and most schools had planned to spread their project across more teachers and faculties to build on the success of the projects. In this way, projects were seen more as means than ends to address areas of need and concern.

The case study report for Bilby Primary noted:

The Principal proposes that the current project team will continue as the ICT team, and that a new Quality Teaching team will be established. She further proposes that someone from the project team will also be a member of the new QT team, and will guide its progress in selecting and developing a new project. The Principal has recently completed a training course in INTEL (integrating ICT into all school learning areas), and will share her newly acquired knowledge with the whole school staff (including the project team).

Further Discussion and Final Comments

Research data derived from teachers, school reports and journals, academic partners and the researchers' site visits, demonstrated that the Quality Teaching Action Learning projects stimulated and enhanced teacher professional learning in the schools concerned. The use of teams of interested and committed teachers was fundamental to this process.
Team members were encouraged, empowered, and grew in the course of the action learning projects. Important factors in the operation of teams and their projects included the time, focus and support for professional learning, the teamwork and collaboration of team members, and the work of team leaders. The willingness of principals to share power and responsibility and to respect and foster the leadership capacity of others was also crucial.

The QTAL projects were effective in facilitating teachers' action learning, but were also effective in clarifying, valuing and affirming what teachers and schools were already doing. Thus, the projects operated in a challenge, rather than a deficit context. Likewise, the use of the NSW model of pedagogy was seen to validate and affirm what "good teachers do," whilst providing a useful framework for reflection and action.

On a cautionary note, it is fair to say that teams were more adept and successful in promoting professional learning than in the research aspects of the projects. There was some uncertainty over the tools and data needed to track changes in student outcomes over the projects and the longer term.

Most school projects had originally included the strategy of peer observation of teaching, and most of these schools had postponed this. It was clear that there are still feelings of risk, fear, and exposure associated with being observed teaching, which has connotations of judgment rather than development for some teachers. However, on a positive note, the teamwork and professional learning arising from the QTAL projects provided a foundation whereby teachers were now feeling less threatened and more comfortable about professional sharing.

The evaluation team, while being convinced of the overall effectiveness of the QTAL projects in achieving their aims, would suggest caution in making such innovations mandatory. The voluntary nature of involvement and the fact that projects grew from needs already identified within the schools appeared important conditions for project effectiveness.

While the evaluation team was not directly focused on distributed leadership as either a precursor or product of the action learning projects, it was apparent how important distributed leadership was to action learning and project success. Leadership cannot easily develop in a vacuum, and the action learning projects provided the vehicle to build on and further develop leadership capacity in the schools concerned.

The time frame for the QTAL projects was relatively brief, yet there was sufficient evidence to suggest that distributed leadership has the capacity, when aligned with teacher learning, to help foster that elusive phenomenon, the learning community.

Because of the timing of the evaluation it was too early to obtain hard data on student achievement attributable to the projects. However, there was no doubt that significant teacher learning had occurred and that new approaches to pedagogy had been put into place. Early indicators were that students were responding positively to new programs and more student-centered approaches to learning.

Both teachers and students were more enthusiastic, and school progress report, interview, journal and observational data indicated enhanced teacher reflection, cooperation, and understanding. Teachers were moving outside their comfort zones with greater preparedness to take risks and adoption of new approaches. Productive self-criticism had increased.

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Endnotes

1 All school names are fictitious.
2 The project leader from Red Gum took up a position as a Quality Teaching consultant in the local DET area office following the evaluation study, an unlikely outcome prior to the project.

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