

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN ACTION

**AN INQUIRY APPROACH
FOR TEACHERS OF LITERACY**

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Foreword by Douglas Fisher



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collaboration among all stakeholders, and through assessment of the needs and strengths of both students and teachers alike. Inquiry-based professional learning is predicated on determining the questions that need to be asked and answered in order to identify the problems that need to be solved.

Throughout this book, we provide a look into the collaborative, inquiry-based approach to professional learning undertaken by the fictional Blue Falls School. The school is working on effectively implementing the Australian Curriculum. But if you are not using these particular standards, simply substitute whatever variations of the you are using.

In addition, it is beyond the scope of this book to provide specific examples and recommendations for professional learning that focus on subject area standards beyond English and literacy. But the principles of collaborative inquiry, and the related implementation recommendations in this book, are certainly relevant and can be adapted easily for professional learning efforts in all disciplines. In essence, this book is intended for anyone who is involved in planning and implementing professional learning opportunities at the school and/or regional level, and for courses that prepare educators for this work. Because the text emphasises the importance of collaboration and inquiry by teams of educators, it is relevant for teachers, principals, specialists, literacy and instructional coaches, curriculum leaders, parent representatives and university educators. We have included examples of literacy teams collaborating at both the primary and secondary school levels.

ORGANISATION OF THE TEXT

Each chapter follows this pattern:

- An opening graphic organiser explaining the chapter's structure.
- Realistic and detailed vignettes about literacy teams from the fictional Blue Falls School, and their collaborative inquiry into an aspect of working with the Australian Curriculum standards.
- A focus on principles of inquiry-based professional learning that are Dynamic, Intense, Situated, Substantive, Collaborative and Personal.
- An overview of the relevant research and theoretical constructs for the chapter's content.
- School-based examples, forms, charts and graphs.

- Concrete connections between professional learning and rigorous standards.
- Questions for reflection and discussion.

A brief explanation of each of the six chapters follows below:

Chapter 1: Realising the Power of Professional Learning. This chapter sets the foundation for our view of educators taking responsibility for their own learning through problem-solving actions that are deliberate and responsive to authentic problems. We discuss policies that affect professional learning, misconceptions that can inhibit such learning and principles that guide an inquiry approach to professional learning.

Chapter 2: Supporting Teachers as Adult Learners. In this chapter we discuss the differences between how children and adults learn, with a brief review of adult learning theory and research. We suggest that collaborative, inquiry-based professional learning is differentiated, and is congruent with the research on how adults, and teachers in particular, learn best.

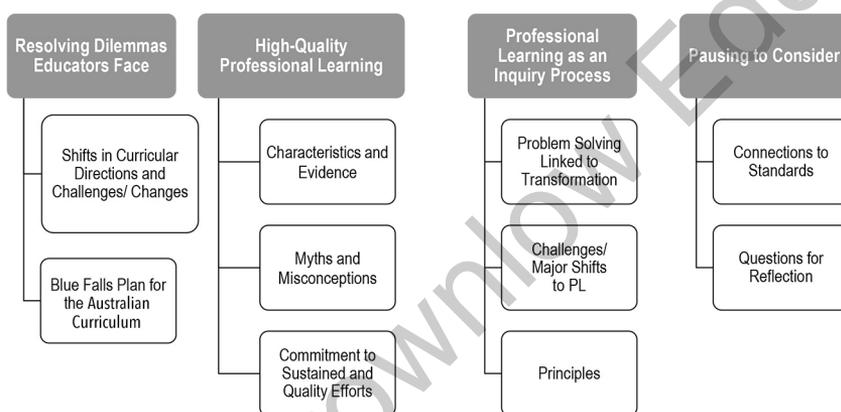
Chapter 3: Using Assessment to Situate Professional Learning. The focus of this chapter is two-pronged: 1) assessing students' literacy strengths and needs, using a variety of methods and multiple indicators, and 2) assessing teachers' strengths and needs as related to literacy instruction. Data from these needs assessments lead to the collaborative generation of questions and identification of potential problems that may need to be investigated.

Chapter 4: Creating the Professional Learning Plan and Putting It into Action. In this chapter we discuss strategic actions for goal setting and implementing a plan for professional learning. We then present two methods, book study and lesson demonstrations, that foster inquiry, deepen professional learning, and examine applications of new ideas in practice.

Chapter 5: Sustaining the Professional Learning Plan. Additional methods that foster learning and systematic problem solving are presented in this chapter. Teacher research groups, family literacy study groups, lesson study, and peer and literacy coach mentoring are methods that engage analytical thinking and deepen understandings of how to apply new knowledge for optimal instruction and student learning.

Chapter 6: Evaluating and Understanding Change. In this final chapter we bring the collaborative inquiry process full circle,

Realising the Power of Professional Learning



Professional learning engages our problem-solving abilities, and in the process, prepares us to be thoughtful and deliberate in our response to both exciting and challenging events that accompany societal, educational and policy changes. Included among these changes are increased diversity of students' cultural and linguistic histories; increased economic inequality and numbers of disadvantaged children; increased attention to student dropout rates and literacy difficulties; policies advancing new standards; and educational innovations, especially within digital learning platforms. Being thoughtful and deliberate in our decision-making requires a shift in how our professional learning occurs, moving away from being told what to do as educators and moving toward taking agency for directing our own professional learning. *Our aim for the professional learning described in the chapters that follow is the enhancement of teachers' and principals' abilities to address and resolve dilemmas they face when responding to multiple changes that affect*

teaching and learning. Professional learning occurs in the midst of engagement with authentic problems, in examining possibilities and different perspectives, and in implementing practices that will resolve those problems.

This view of educators taking responsibility for their own professional learning by engaging in problem solving is guided by a social constructivist view and transformational learning theory. The emphasis for learning moves away from a focus on what a person knows to how a person knows it (Rohlwing & Spelman, 2014). Interactive factors such as learners' motivation, cognition, emotion, effect and attitude affect the success of professional learning opportunities. The concept of educators' professional learning has evolved over six decades through identifiable stages. Kragler, Martin and Sylvester have labelled these stages (2014, pp. 484–495)

- the inservice era (1950s–1960s)
- the staff development era (1970s–1980s)
- the professional development era (1990s–2000s)
- the professional learning era (mid-2000s to the present).

In this century, we find recommendations for creating professional learning communities that engage in collaborative and collective inquiry (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008).

Guiding our development of this text is the firm belief that changes and professional growth occur when we are directing our own learning and when that learning is situated within an examination of the realities we face. We choose to use the term *professional learning* instead of *professional development*, to reference the multiple opportunities that engage our thinking and our informed decision-making, and that advance our knowledge and expertise.

HOW ARE POLICY CHANGES AFFECTING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EARLY IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

Perhaps the most comprehensive policy change affecting professionals is the adoption and implementation of the Australian Curriculum. As nationwide literacy standards are brought to the forefront, we draw attention to its association with the multiple challenges to teaching and learning that we described above (e.g. increased diversity of students' cultural and linguistic histories). Shifts in curricula and instruction that come with implementing new standards can serve as a

springboard for addressing additional issues and challenges embedded in the school setting.

The requirements for English in the Australian Curriculum, for example, provide standards for Language, Literature and Literacy, which may require some significant shifts in instruction. These standards identify what students need to know by the end of each year level. Like other standards-based frameworks such as the United States' Common Core State Standards, the Australian Curriculum holds the promise of new directions for meaningful instructional and learning environments. Yet the implementation of such standards requires that schools commit to high-quality professional development that will support teachers' remodelling of literacy instruction in ways that enhance their own teaching and their students' learning, *and* respond to anticipated shifts in instruction.

CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH IMPLEMENTING NEW STANDARDS

The United States National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE), representing a coalition of 30 professional associations, educational policy organisations and foundations, completed a national survey of educators across year levels, subject matter, learning areas and roles, to examine their preparedness for the Common Core State Standards, as well as their goals for learning experiences of students. As you read the results of this study, think about how you would answer the question on your preparation to implement the new Australian standards. Would your responses be similar to those reported on the NCLE survey?

Data from the 2013–2014 survey of 3000, reported in Figure 1.2 (p. 5), indicated that the majority of teachers felt that their schools' literacy curriculum materials were not well aligned with the new standards. Also, teachers felt unprepared to implement the new literacy state standards and believed that there were problems associated with lack of time for intense and prolonged professional development and insufficient mechanisms to promote the collaborative work needed for change. NCLE concluded that "the transition to the new standards seems to be going best when teachers are highly engaged in the process and have time to work together to use their professional expertise to bring all students to higher levels of literacy" (NCLE Report, 2014, p. 11).

Figure 1.1. Instructional Shifts Expected with Implementation of CCSS

1. Balance of Text Genre
2. Increase of Text Complexity
3. Students Generating Evidence-Based Responses
4. Writing from (and Integrating) Multiple Sources
5. Writing in Multiple Genres (e.g. arguments, explanatory papers, narratives)
6. Building Academic Vocabulary

Source: Adapted from National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Key Shifts in the English Language Arts, Common Core State Standards* www.corestandards.org

We provide the NCLE example to illustrate a change in curricular direction that is having a profound impact on teaching and learning in some schools. Now we introduce you to some educators at Blue Falls School, who are facing curricular change and initiating their own program of professional learning. We then discuss features of high-quality professional learning with evidence supporting these features, and common misconceptions that can intrude on positive outcomes. Next we discuss more specifically the role of inquiry, major shifts that an inquiry approach requires of professional learning, and guiding principles. We conclude this chapter by drawing connections between the features of high-quality professional learning and challenges associated with implementing new curriculum standards. Also, we provide discussion questions that we hope will encourage you to pause and consider how the content of this chapter relates to your teaching and professional learning.

CONNECTIONS TO INSTRUCTION: INTRODUCTION TO THE BLUE FALLS VIGNETTE

Blue Falls School provides an example of how one school is preparing to initiate its professional learning program. In this vignette we describe professional learning efforts around the Australian Curriculum. But the implementation challenges as described are relevant to any school or region's adoption of new, rigorous standards. Here and in the chapters that follow, Blue Falls' situation and actions will serve as an anchor for our discussion of the professional learning concept and methods for achieving its goals.

Figure 1.2. Summary of NCLE 2013–2014 Findings

1. Nationwide, most teachers do not yet feel well prepared to implement the new literacy standards, especially with high-needs students.
2. Teachers report that working with other educators is the most powerful form of preparation.
3. Unfortunately, the amount of time teachers have to work together is brief and shrinking, and most teachers are not substantially involved in planning how their schools will implement the new literacy standards.
4. Where teachers are significantly involved in renovating literacy instruction, positive changes are well under way.
5. Purposeful professional work that draws on the talents of everyone in the system is strongly associated with progress in standards implementation.
6. Teachers in all disciplines are actively engaged in shifting literacy practices, and those who have the opportunity to work together are making the biggest shifts.
7. When given the opportunity, teachers are owning the change by innovating and designing appropriate lessons and materials.

Source: National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE), 2014. Remodeling literacy learning together. Paths to standards implementation.

Two Schools' Preparation for Professional Learning

Demographics and history. In December, the principals and teacher-leaders at Blue Falls Primary School and the neighbouring Blue Falls Secondary College began working together to plan for a second year of a multi-year professional development project. The schools are located in a suburban area of low socio-economic status, and thus receive a relatively high level of financial support from the state government.

A significant proportion of the combined student body come from families who have immigrated to Australia within the last fifteen years. For many students, English is thus a second language, and they often struggle with applying literacy skills to subjects outside of formal English classes.

The two schools have a history of collaboration, which is viewed as important, given the high proportion of Year 6 graduates who then attend Blue Falls Secondary College. For two prior years, the instructional leadership team and classroom teachers focused their professional learning efforts on meeting STEM (i.e. science, technology, engineering and mathematics) goals. For their changes and impact, they received commendations from the state department of education and national leaders for their strong programs and steady increases in student achievement in the STEM areas. The schools are also known in the region