Teachers As Learners

Australian Government Quality Teacher Program
Action Learning for School Teams Project
Evaluation Report

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Teachers As Learners

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This version is an extract of the report *Teachers as Learners*. An electronic version of this report is also available on the NSW AGQTP website at www.qtp.nsw.edu.au.

Section 1 – Executive Summary

This is a report of the evaluation of the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program (AGQTP) *Action learning for school teams* project. The evaluation of the *Action learning for school teams* was commissioned under tender by the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) to the Division of Professional Learning, Faculty of Education & Social Work, University of Sydney.

Purpose of the evaluation

The evaluation was not centrally concerned with the contents of the NSW discussion paper *Quality teaching in NSW public schools* (2003). The evaluation focused directly on action learning as a form of professional development for teachers in schools. The main question driving the evaluation was:

> *Under what conditions is action learning an appropriate and effective form of professional development for teachers in NSW public schools?*

Action learning (Revans, 1982) is 'a means by which people learn with and from each other by attempting to identify and then implement solutions to their workplace problems/issues' (p65). One of the key issues in successful action learning is participant ability to ask insightful questions that stimulate new ideas and actions and reflection on these.

Methodology

Patton's model of Utilization Focused Evaluation was employed in the evaluation. This model provides important opportunities for negotiation with intended users to clarify purposes and report formats. It seeks to ensure that information gathered during the evaluation is appropriate. Rather than use a survey, the 50 successful project submissions, 39 interim and 48 final reports were analysed by the evaluation team. In this way the team did not unduly interfere with projects, participants and schools. In addition, nearly half the projects were visited and eight projects were chosen for detailed case studies. Interviews with case study participants were undertaken. These were verified by project team members and coordinators before the case studies were written. Data was also gathered from 20 of the 43 academic partners.

Structure of the report

The report is divided into eight sections. Section one is the executive summary. Sections two, three and four provide the framework for reading the case studies in section five. In section 2.1, the report briefly provides details of the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program and its structure in NSW. Section 2.2 is a brief outline of the *Action learning for school teams* project, its context, purposes and features that were central to the evaluation. The report then provides an outline of the evaluation methodology and methods of information gathering and analysis (2.3). The next part of section two (2.4) provides a brief historical analysis and account of action learning.

Section three comprises the analysis of the project submissions and progress reports provided at the end of the first phase of the evaluation. Section four reports the analysis of project final evaluation reports. The fifth section contains accounts of eight projects as negotiated case studies. One of the key areas of the evaluation was the construction of relationships between project teams and their academic partners. The data from this aspect is reported in section six. Section seven discusses the main findings identified from an analysis of the cases and the project final reports. The final section, eight, provides conclusions and recommendations arising from the evaluation.

Major findings

- Project submissions
  Two analyses of the original project submissions were undertaken. The first analysis rated each submission against a set of well established criteria for successful organisational change, including those specific to change and reform in school contexts. The second analysis employed criteria related to the establishment of contexts of successful organisational learning and professional learning communities. Overall this analysis of submissions suggested that the framework for the submissions was very effective in capturing explicit evidence of some of the most important factors recognised for effective change and professional learning in schools. Submissions provided more evidence of change criteria than action learning. Perhaps some schools are less familiar with establishing structures for effective professional learning. There may be a need for more professional development about criteria for successful learning and the use of action learning as a professional learning tool.

- Interim reports
  The thirty-nine project progress reports received by 30 January, 2004 were analysed as evidence alongside information collected during site visits for the selection of nine projects that would become in-depth case studies.

  Generally, the authors of the project reports provided detailed information about the project context, the changes that had taken place, products such as lesson plans and units and the supporting roles of the academic partner and project manager. Many responses did not, however, provide explicit details of their action learning processes. The lack of detailed information in a number of the progress reports regarding action learning may be evidence that many teachers in schools do not understand the nature of action learning and points to the need for further professional development around this concept and its processes.

- Final reports
  Final project reports claimed a great deal of evidence for the impact of the action learning project. These were mainly observed changes in teacher planning and teaching practices and the language used to talk about these. The importance of ownership and focusing on professional needs was recognised as was the powerful potential for action learning as a model of professional development to bring about both individual and school change. There was much positive comment regarding the role of academic partners with strong suggestion that they become engaged with

the school earlier in any action learning project. A large majority of criticisms were related to the timing and time frame of the projects. All project reports affirmed the importance of the funding in providing the opportunity for release from classroom teaching to collaborate in meeting, planning, evaluating and reflecting.

Data from the final evaluation reports from each project reported in this section provided general patterns of the activities that occurred within the 50 projects of the *Action learning for school teams.* Alongside these patterns, the individual case studies explored the reasons for the manner in which activities were selected and constructed and the issues that emerged in the project sites related to action learning.

- Case studies
  The eight cases were chosen in an attempt to represent the diversity of the contexts in which projects were located and the demographics of students, staff and communities: some were located in Sydney, some in remote rural towns; some were large schools, some were small; some were primary, some secondary. They were also selected to attempt to illustrate the diversity of approaches: small teams within schools; whole school and across school projects; some projects within specific KLAs, others across KLAs. Although these case studies have focussed on action learning teams and, in particular, the *Quality teaching* framework, it is clear that each school profiled provided an exemplar of a professional learning community (Senge,1990, 1999, Hopkins,1998, Ewing, 2002).

  The most important factors contributing to the success of the *Action learning for school teams* projects reported by case study participants were the funding and personnel support provided. This included support from both the project manager and academic partners. Other important factors were the collegiality and collaboration developed as a result of teachers, and sometimes teachers and students, working together both within a school and across schools.

- Role of the Academic partner
  One member of the evaluation team gathered feedback through telephone, email and face to face interviews from 20 of the 43 academic partners involved in the action learning projects in order to provide their distinctive perspectives on the processes, experiences and outcomes of this professional development model.

  It is important to note that the majority of academic partners regarded action learning as a positive addition to a teacher's repertoire of strategies for professional development. Most welcomed the opportunity to work alongside teachers in schools. While there is evidence from the feedback to indicate a need for academic partners to experience a more thorough immersion in the principles and model of action learning prior to engaging in a project, the academic partners were in general receptive and responsive to the potential of this model. It is also clear that universities need to act in a manner that demonstrates their commitment to recognise partnerships with schools as an integral part of academics' work.

Conclusions

The degree of success in different aspects of the *Action learning for school teams* project varied considerably. Those projects that appeared to be most successful were characterised by:

- a successful previous experience of school-based change particularly in which teachers have worked collegially in teams investigating practice;
- a school community culture that focused on learning and emphasised teacher learning;
- a project plan that was:
    - achievable within the parameters of the project and the context of the school and its activities;
    - carefully designed through collaboration of at least key prospective team members; and
    - focused around purposes and anticipated outcomes that reflected priorities clearly identified by the school, often in school development plans, and the professional needs of teachers in their everyday classroom practice.
- an environment and staff that were prepared for the project and its demands, impacts and anticipated outcomes;
- a school executive leadership that was actively supportive but delegated ownership of and responsibility for the projects' activities to the project team, even if the principal or executive were members of the team;
- strong, sensitive and distributed leadership by a project coordinator(s) who also managed the project and maintained strong communication with all members of the team and with other staff in the school;
- a number of teachers who were committed to both their own learning and professional development and that of all team members as well as how this learning could be used to improve their practice and students' learning experiences and outcomes;
- clearly planned, purposeful flexible opportunities for team members to learn, plan, act and reflect in environments engendering high levels of risk and trust resulting in powerful learning relating to their own classroom practice
- engagement in the professional learning of the team, and, where appropriate, of other school community members including other staff, students and members of the wider school community;
- a flexibly arranged relationship with an academic partner located in reasonably close proximity to the project school (s) based on clear expectations of roles and responsibilities, who had knowledge specific to the purposes and outcomes of the project and acted in a way to affirm the knowledge teachers already possessed and guided them as a critical friend in focused processes of professional learning that teachers controlled; and,
- a context in which team members knew that their work and learning was highly valued by others in the school community and will form the basis of ongoing wider and sustained learning in that community by themselves and others.

Recommendations
Nine recommendations flow from the evaluation and evidence gathered. These recommendations are designed to ensure that the use of action learning as a form of professional development and learning for teachers in schools in NSW becomes even more effective than that experienced by participants in the *Action learning for school teams* project.

Recommendation 1: That action learning based on small teams of teachers strategically selected by schools and having opportunities for external support be continued as a major form of professional development in NSW public schools.

Recommendation 2: That follow-up research during 2004/5 be undertaken with a number of selected schools that participated in the *Action learning for school teams* project to investigate to what extent and how action learning has been sustained in those schools. Such research would contribute to the case record of recommendation 3.

Recommendation 3: That the case studies gathered in the current evaluation, particularly those that are high quality exemplars of action learning, and any further case studies gathered be used as the basis of a case record (Stenhouse, 1975) for the purposes of informing schools, principals and teachers of the most effective ways to use action learning for teacher professional learning and development. As a beginning to this, it is recommended that the case studies from the current project be made available to all public schools in NSW and particularly any schools selected as future action learning project schools prior to them engaging in their project.

Recommendation 4: That, in any future projects using academic partners or any other form of support external to the DET, a meeting(s) occur between the school and their intended academic partner prior to the start of the project and prior to any formal agreement being signed. The purposes of such a meeting(s) would be to negotiate expected project purposes and the specific expectations of the roles and responsibilities of the external partner and for both parties to decide whether they wished to continue with the proposed arrangement.

Recommendation 5: That prior to the beginning of any future projects based on action learning a training day be held for participants in school action learning teams and their respective academic partners. The purpose of the training day would be to inform all participants of the nature and processes of action learning and those conditions that are likely to produce the most effective action learning and professional learning. In this there should be a strong and explicit emphasis on evidence-based practice, ways of providing such evidence of teacher professional learning including protocols for focused and purposeful critical reflection.

Recommendation 6: That in future projects involving academic partners strategies should be developed to ensure that university heads of school and/or deans of education in universities from which academic partners will be drawn are informed in detail of the project, its purposes and the role and responsibilities that any academic partner is

expected to assume. They should be encouraged to see the role of academic partner as an integral part of the workload of an academic in Education and as a member of a university that believes it is committed to teacher learning and the improvement of the teaching profession. Further, a head of school or dean or other senior management member of the relevant university should be a co-signatory to every memorandum of understanding involving one of their academic staff.

Recommendation 7: That in any future projects employing action learning as a professional learning strategy the role of the project manager be similar to that of the *Action learning for school teams* project manager, that is 'hands on' and spending much of the allotted time on project sites working with action learning teams. Evidence gathered in the evaluation clearly demonstrates that the nature of action learning projects and the phenomena of learning demands early support at the project site and not from a distant office telephone or computer.

Recommendation 8: That in selecting schools for future funded action learning projects evidence of the following criteria be strongly considered: history of successful previous school-based change; focus of the proposed project is a central component of the school plan and its priorities; teacher professional learning is part of the core business of the school; the purposes, anticipated outcomes and strategies to achieve them are clear and are achievable given the time frame and other parameters of the project. It is these criteria, evidence of which was available in the original submission for funding, that proved to be very useful predictors of successful *Action learning for school teams* projects.

Recommendation 9: That the opportunity for funded independent evaluation of the processes and experiences of action learning teams be continued. As part of any such evaluation there should be attempts made to investigate and record the detailed tracking of the learning journeys of both individuals and teams engaged in action learning projects. It is such tracking that will enable understanding of the processes of action learning and the conditions that make it effective as a model of teacher professional development beyond that that has been able to be achieved in the present evaluation.

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Section 2 - Introduction

This is a report of the evaluation of '*Action learning for school teams*'. It is one activity in the NSW Australian Government Quality Teacher Program. The quality teaching projects are funded by the national government with the aim of promoting quality teaching within eight national priority areas:

- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Mathematics
- Science
- Technology including ICT
- Vocational education
- National Safe Schools Framework, and
- Professional Standards for teachers and school leaders.

The evaluation of the *Action learning for school teams* project was tendered by the DET to the Division of Professional Learning, Faculty of Education & Social Work, University of Sydney. The team, led by Associate Professor Robyn Ewing, Director of the Division, and Dr David Smith also included Drs Michael Anderson, Robyn Gibson and Jackie Manuel.

The evaluation report is divided into eight sections. Section one is the executive summary. Sections two, three and four provide the context and the framework for reading the case studies in section five. In section two, initially the report briefly provides details of the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program and its structure in NSW (2.1). Next is a brief outline of the *Action learning for school teams* project, its context, its purposes and features that were central to the evaluation (2.2). The report then provides an outline of the evaluation methodology and methods of information gathering and analysis together (2.3) with a brief historical analysis and account of action learning (2.4). Section three comprises the analysis of project submissions and progress reports delivered at the end of the first phase of the evaluation. The fourth section is a report of the analysis of data from the project 's final evaluation reports. Section five comprises case study accounts of eight selected projects. One of the key areas of the evaluation was the construction of relationships between project teams and their academic partners. The data from this area is reported in section six. Section seven discusses the main findings identified from an analysis of the cases and the project final reports. The final section, eight, provides conclusions and recommendations arising from the evaluation.

a) The Australian Government Quality Teacher Program in NSW

In NSW the AGQTP consisted of 55 separate activities. These were across educational sectors and involved over 21,000 primary and secondary teachers. *Action learning for school teams* was one of these 55 activities.

b) *Action learning for school teams*

Action learning for school teams was an across priority areas activity involving 499 teachers in 50 different individual projects in 111 state primary, secondary, central schools and schools for specific purposes. Individual schools or clusters of schools were allocated grants from $10,000-$60,000 to support teacher professional learning associated with the NSW model of pedagogy outlined in the discussion paper *Quality teaching in NSW public schools* (2003).

The NSW model described in the discussion paper was developed by Dr James Ladwig and Professor Jennifer Gore from the University of Newcastle in collaboration with, and on behalf of the NSW DET. It builds on the research of Fred Newman and colleagues who developed the Authentic Pedagogies framework and the work of James Ladwig and Alan Luke who expanded Newman's work into Productive Pedagogies which was the focus of the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (2001).

Each project was based on cycles of action learning by teacher teams. It aimed to extend teachers' knowledge and understanding of the NSW model of pedagogy. Through a collaborative exploration of the ideas in the document it was expected that teachers would implement classroom practices that resulted in higher levels of intellectual quality, through the creation of quality learning environments with activities and content that ensured significance for students.

During Term 3, 2003, proposals for projects were invited from schools. Two hundred and ninety four were received. From these, 50 were selected for funding and support. It is these 50 projects that are addressed in this evaluation report. The *Action learning for school teams* project occurred during Term 4, 2003 and Term 1, 2004, a maximum of 20 weeks.

c) The Evaluation of *Action learning for school teams*: Methodology and Methods

The evaluation was not centrally concerned with the contents of the NSW discussion paper. The evaluation focused directly on action learning as a form of professional development for teachers in schools. The main question driving the evaluation was:

> *Under what conditions is action learning an appropriate and effective form of professional development for teachers in NSW public schools?*

This question assumed that, as the brief review below demonstrates, there was already a body of existing research that confirmed that action learning could be an effective form of professional development in a variety of organisational contexts. The project aimed to investigate what specific conditions would make action learning an effective professional learning process in NSW public schools. The opportunity for teachers to develop an understanding of the discussion paper and begin to translate this into their classrooms and pedagogy, presented an ideal professional learning challenge in which to research the efficacy of the action learning model in NSW schools.

The framework of action learning established in the *Action learning for school teams* project was characterised by three elements that were central to the commission of the evaluation, its focus and processes. These included:

- the creation of a project team who formed a critical mass of teachers in the project context(s) and who would work together towards improving their individual and collective practice;

- the allocation of substantial funding to buy time and resources for the project team to come together for professional learning and reflect on and discuss their practices; and

- access to external expertise to support project teams in their professional learning activities. This included a funded academic partner from a university allocated to each project by the NSW *Action learning for school teams* management committee, a NSW *Action learning for school teams* project manager and, in some cases, Department district consultants participating as part of their normal work with schools.

The three specific features of the *Action learning for school teams* identified above and the nature of the phenomena being evaluated, i.e teacher professional learning, were important considerations in identifying the methodology chosen for the evaluation.

There have been many models and approaches developed for program evaluation. In 1999 at the American educational research association (AERA) meeting in Montreal an expert panel of evaluators from the AERA evaluation network reviewed these models. Unanimously they agreed that the approach of Utilization-focused evaluation developed by Patton (1999 3rd ed.) was the most effective in its potential to realise organisational change. In reaching this decision the panel mentioned a number of factors. One of the major factors concerned the impact of evaluation reports.

There has been a long history of evaluators and their reports having very little impact on changing practice. There are many reasons for this. One of the most important is that many models and approaches do not take into sufficient consideration the interests of either the participants or those commissioning the evaluation. If any evaluation is to facilitate significant change, the perceptions and interests of both of these parties are of prime consideration.

The central tenet of Patton's Utilization-focused evaluation model is the 'intended use by the intended users' (Patton, 1999:20). The evaluator(s) facilitates judgement and decision making by intended users rather than acting as a distant and independent judge. Thus, negotiation of all decisions associated with the evaluation from purposes, through information needed and the methods to achieve this, to the structure and language of the reporting are negotiated from the beginning and at each critical point in the evaluation journey.

In the evaluation of the *Action learning for school teams* there were two main groups of users. The first group are those personnel in the NSW DET Professional Support and Curriculum Directorate who commissioned and managed the evaluation and are responsible for the organisation and management of future projects concerning teacher learning. Several meetings took place between the evaluators and the commissioners to negotiate aspects of the evaluation. The first, prior to Term 4, 2003 clarified the purposes, structure, methods and time frame of the evaluation and the nature of the reports. Further meetings occurred at the end of Term 4 when the first project progress reports were submitted, at the start of 2004 to make decisions regarding which projects would become the case study projects and prior to this report being finalised. In addition, the evaluators were in frequent contact with the commissioners either by email, or at conferences or in schools.

Thus all key decisions relating to the evaluation were negotiated with those who commissioned the evaluation, and formed the evaluation management team. As intended users it was essential to ensure that their present and future interests in the evaluation were considered. This negotiation was even to the point where some of the original intentions of the evaluation plan were not implemented. For example, originally it had been proposed that the first phase of the evaluation would be a survey of all 50 projects and that this would form the basis for choosing the case studies. Because such a strategy was deemed to be too intrusive into the lives and work of the teachers given the project's short time frame, this was not done. Instead, the project applications were analysed and a number of new questions were negotiated and inserted into the progress evaluation protocols. There were also major changes to the length and style of the draft final report because of the potential intended audiences.

In the *Action learning for school teams* projects, however, it was not only personnel from the Department who were intended users. In fact, the most important users, in terms of learning from their experience of action learning and using it as a basis for changing practice in classrooms and schools, were the participating teachers. The evaluators in their practice, particularly in those projects chosen for case study, negotiated decisions with the teachers in the project teams. Thus not only the entry and work of the evaluators on site were negotiated, but each account of each project recorded in this report. The framework for this negotiation is included as appendix 2, Participant information statement. Many teachers and principals have commented on the impact of the processes of the case evaluations and how they engendered motivation and enthusiasm in teachers because of the interest being shown in the teachers' learning and work. More important are the comments relating to the manner in which the evaluations and associated observations and interviews acted as powerful agents for teacher reflection and critical analysis of their experience of action learning.

The data sources for the evaluation of *Action learning for school teams* were extensive. They included the 50 submissions of projects accepted for funding, some 60 pages of notes of observation of project activities, 39 progress evaluation reports, 8 detailed case studies, 20 interviews with academic partners and 48 final evaluation reports.

The evaluation was divided into two phases. The first was the extensive phase and the information gathered was used to select the projects for the second or intensive phase. The first phase extended during Term 4, 2003 and into the holiday break prior to 2004. There were two main activities during this phase. The first were visits to events in some 25 project schools by members of the evaluation team. These events varied from short discussions with a project coordinator, or meetings with a full project team to half or full day activities associated with different aspects of action learning. The visits included a range of projects in Sydney as well as projects in regional cities and rural and remote locations. They included small schools and large schools, primary, central and secondary schools and a school for specific purposes. By the end of Term 4, the evaluators had visited a sample of projects that represented the population of project schools.

The second activity of the first phase of the evaluation was an analysis of the progress reports for each project submitted at the end of Term 4. The reports were divided between evaluation team members. Each report was read by at least two team members and all of the reports were read by one of the two principal researchers. A content analysis was undertaken of the reports. A sample of some 20 projects demonstrating a diversity in context, content and process were identified from this analysis. A more detailed analysis of these was then completed (see Section 3).

As a result of this second level analysis 12 projects were identified. In identifying these projects the evaluation team tried to balance the following criteria: primary, secondary, central and schools for specific purposes; small schools, large schools, collegiates; small project teams of a few teachers and projects involving all teachers in a school; within one school and across several schools; particular foci of projects (eg., particular KLAs or across KLAs ; product centred or teacher learning centred); those in special education settings; those engaging students; those engaging parents. In negotiations with the DET evaluation management committee a final list of nine projects were selected. Participants from nine projects were approached to be involved in the development of case studies. The selected collegiate project team elected to withdraw from the evaluation. By the time this was communicated it was too late to select a replacement project for case study.

The second phase of the evaluation, Term 1, 2004, was focused on the detailed study of eight projects. The negotiated construction of the accounts of their experience are provided in the section five of the report. First a letter (appendix 1) was sent to the principals of schools in selected projects. This identified their school as a potential case study school and indicated the nature of the expected commitment of project team members if they agreed to the invitation.

After acceptance from the principal was received, each project coordinator was contacted to arrange a suitable date and time for two of the evaluation team to visit the school and conduct either one-on-one, pair or focus group interviews. The nature of the interview setting was left for each school to decide. One day's casual release payment was made to each participating project to facilitate the data collection. One of the two principal evaluators and one other member of the evaluation team conducted the interviews. Most

interviews were audiotaped. Notes of record of interviews were then prepared and returned to interview participants to modify if necessary, verify and then return.

These verified records of interview then formed the main basis for the construction of the case studies. Information from original submissions and interim and final reports were also used when appropriate. The principles underpinning the interview data gathering are provided, as already indicated, in appendix 2. All interviews were based on the same set of questions so that similar information was being gathered across contexts. The questions were used more as probes to guide the interview conversation rather than as a verbatim list. The questions (appendix 3) were generated by the evaluation team from their observations of projects during Term 4, 2003 and Term 1, 2004, from the analysis of the progress evaluation reports and from relevant research and literature.

Each case study draft was prepared by one of the evaluators who had been responsible for gathering the data for that project and for verifying the records of interview. As the drafts were completed they were returned to the relevant project coordinator. Project coordinators were asked to discuss the draft with their team members and their principal, make any adjustments and then return the amended version. All drafts were also read and commented upon by the evaluation team. Final versions based on accounts verified by project participants are included in section five of the report. Pseudonyms for the schools are used despite most case study schools indicating they would be happy to be identified.

Before providing accounts of the case study projects it is necessary to provide some background to the nature and characteristics of action learning.

d) Action learning: Nature & Characteristics

Action learning is not a new concept. It was developed by Revans during the 1940s to address individual lifelong learning needs. Revans (1982) defines action learning as 'a means by which people learn with and from each other by attempting to identify and then implement solutions to their problems/issues' (p65). Thus, Revans suggested that action learning is action oriented towards implementing a project or a solution. It is clearly focused, in Revans' writing, on workplace learning (1997) and is most appropriate when people are confronted by new problems to which there is no solution. Action learning is about working and learning with and from each other to explore possible ideas and solutions. One of the key issues in successful action learning is the ability of participants to ask insightful questions that stimulate new ideas and actions and reflection on these. This discussion and reflection on ideas and actions then inform future decision making.

The other important feature of action learning is its cyclic nature. One cycle of reflecting, planning, doing, reflecting leads to the next cycle and so on. In this, it is very similar to another related process, action research. While there are strong similarities between the two concepts and their processes, arguably, there are also some important differences. First, while action research is certainly applicable to the solution of workplace problems and the improvement of workplace practice, and has been used extensively in schools for that purpose, it is not restricted to workplaces (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Second, unlike action learning, its specific focus is not the confronting of 'new' problems, as

action learning appears to be from Revans' description above. Action research is principally concerned with improving practice or developing a better understanding of that practice. Third, the practice in action research can be individual or collective. Action learning is clearly about learning and working in teams and it is the team and its dynamics, the learning that each member brings to the team and its processes that are central to action learning.

Finally, although Revans suggests that action learning is action oriented involving implementing a project or solution (1997), it seems that in action learning the emphasis is more on the learning and solutions through the learning rather than learning that has originated in the need for changes in practice, although this may ultimately follow. Thus, arguably the starting point for action learning may not be the desire to improve existing practice, it may be to develop understanding of an issue for which there is no present practice. The beginning point for action research is a situational analysis of existing practice with the express purpose of identifying weaknesses or areas that it is desired to improve. Notwithstanding these slight differences, action learning and action research are both examples of effective approaches to professional learning.

Both action research and action learning have long been applied to the contexts of schools and teachers' work. They focus on the teacher as learner and learner-centred professional learning as part of schools characterised as professional learning communities (Ewing, 2002, 2004; Senge, 2000; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 1998). Teachers are valued as both sources of knowledge and users of this knowledge to generate new knowledge, new ideas and new practices.

The notion of the teacher as a workplace professional learner is part of the wider social world that is changing so rapidly that problems never before encountered are arriving more quickly and previous ideas or solutions are no longer applicable (Smith & Lovat 2003). Thus the idea of 'expert' who is able to provide solutions to teachers becomes highly problematic. If external 'experts' are to be useful in this context they work WITH teachers, recognising the teachers' knowledge and helping them to build new ideas and possibilities from research and learning processes.

Teachers as professional workplace learners, and thus action learning, succeed best in a culture that supports learning (Ewing, 2002). Such school cultures are characterised by a trusting and collaborative organisational climate in which risk taking and learning from mistakes is affirmed and supported. It is a culture where leadership is actively committed to the learning of all members of the school community and commits resources to support such learning within a shared collective mission that sees student and teacher learning as the core business of the school.

As already indicated, two interim evaluation reports based on an analysis of the projects' initial submissions and then progress reports submitted at the end of Term 4, 2003, were completed. The analysis of the submissions and interim evaluation reports are summarised in the next section.

Section 3 – Analysis of Project Submissions & Progress Reports

As part of the evaluation *Action learning for school teams* project two previous reports have been submitted. The first was an analysis of the submissions for funding completed by the schools in the 50 projects finally selected for funding. The second report was an analysis of the progress reports submitted in December, 2003.

Phase One: Analysis of project submissions

Introduction

Two analyses of the original project submissions were undertaken. The purpose was to examine whether factors identified in the literature about school change/reform and professional learning were evident in the submissions. The first analysis rated each submission against a set of well established criteria for successful organisational change, including literature about change and reform in school contexts. The second analysis employed criteria related to the establishment of contexts of successful organisational learning and professional learning communities. Since the *Action learning school teams* project was concerned with bringing about change through teacher professional learning, both of these sets of criteria are pertinent. These initial analyses provided a starting point for the evaluation of the action learning projects. They have been used alongside other evidence in evaluating the effectiveness of action learning as a professional learning model to bring about change in practice. Further such comparison may provide the opportunity to establish whether it would have been possible to predict the success or otherwise of a particular project from an initial analysis of the project submission. It is readily acknowledged, however, that schools did not have this analysis framework when writing their submissions. This analysis also served to examine what was intended before the projects actually began and thus can be viewed as baseline data.

Section three has five sub-sections:

- Section 3.1 details the criteria and the background to and rationale for the selection of the criteria related to organisational change.
- Section 3.2 repeats this for criteria dealing with learning.
- Section 3.3 provides a brief outline of the analysis process used by the evaluation team.
- Section 3.4 provides a summary of the results of the analysis related to organisational change and professional learning.
- Section 3.5 provides a tentative interpretation of results and conclusions.

There is a well established literature dealing with factors that have been identified as essential to realise effective change and reform in schools. These factors are common in the literature of Australia and New Zealand, United States and Canada, the United Kingdom and western Europe. The factors that appear to be most important are identified below along with explanatory comments. The sources from which the factors have been

derived are listed in brackets. A full list and details of sources from which the criteria were identified are provided in the bibliography at the end of the report.

Section 3.1 Organisational Change and Reform

C1.Previous history of change (Cumming & Owen, Cuttance, Fullan, Smith & Lovat): Previous history of change, whether this change was successful or not and teacher attitudes towards and reactions to such change have long been recognised as important factors in subsequent change. In the submissions, evidence was sought for engagement by the school in previous change projects. These may have included the Disadvantaged Schools Program, National Schools Network projects Priority Schools Funding Program, and the Innovative Schools and Best Practice Project.

C2. Part of the School Management Plan (Cuttance, Smith & Lovat)
If a proposed change is part of the wider plan of the school then evidence suggests that it has more chance of being successful because it becomes an element of the priority directions and allocation of resources in the school.

C3. Related to Whole School (Cuttance, Ewing, Fullan, Smith & Lovat)
Related to C2, research suggests that if a proposed change is related to the whole school, so that all stages or faculties are somehow involved, the larger critical mass has a greater chance of success. Submissions indicating total staff involvement in the proposed project were scored more highly on this criteria.

C4. Divisible into Stages/Faculties/KLAs (Ewing, Fullan, Smith & Lovat)
If a proposed change is clearly focused and transferred into specific outcomes for each main organisational element of the school, evidence suggests it should be more successful. Thus evidence was sought from submissions for engagement of stages, faculties or some other organisational unit within a school.

C5. Shared Perception/ Understanding of the Purpose of Change (Ewing, Fullan, Smith & Lovat)
Successful change occurs when there is a shared perception of the nature and purpose of the change. Evidence was sought that the submission had emerged from a process where the purpose or outcome of the action plan had been negotiated in a process involving team participants.

C6. Shared Ownership of the project (Ewing, Fullan, Smith & Lovat)
Ownership by those involved in a change process is one of the most important factors in school change. Related to C5, evidence was sought that the submission had emerged from a process in which nominated team members had participated, as compared to a submission that had obviously been written by one or two people. This initial involvement provided an important point for comparison with report data about the actual project teams.

C7. Attempted Change Expressed in Concrete terms (Fullan, Smith & Lovat)

This is the criteria, now well recognised, that an expected outcome of proposed change should be able to be 'heard', 'seen, 'felt'. This counteracts the situation where the proposed outcome is abstract and nebulous. There are some difficulties with this criteria because not all worthwhile change can necessarily be expressed in concrete terms. Submissions that had some concrete products or artefacts (eg lessons, units or programs) were scored more highly. This is problematic for a project that is primarily about teacher *learnin*g. However, submissions that engaged teachers together in coding and analysis of their own teaching still scored relatively well. Arguably, outcomes expressed in these terms on which evidence-based practice is realised may be more successful in the short time frame than those with ambiguous outcomes, such as 'increased understanding'.

C8. Commitment of Leadership (Cuttance, Ewing, Fullan, Smith & Lovat)
Possibly the most important factor in successful school change is the explicit commitment of the leadership of the school. Thus, submissions in which principals and other executive were members of the learning team tended to score more highly on this criteria than those that did not. This is problematic because leaders may also be committed without being members of the team. There seemed no other way to differentiate within the parameters of school submissions.

C9. Time Made Available for Meetings/Discussions about the Change (Cumming & Owen, Ewing, Fullan, Smith & Lovat)
Evidence was sought in the project description and particularly in the action plan of regular times set aside for meetings of participants.

C10. Sharing With Other Schools (Cuttance, Smith & Lovat)
Research on change suggests that sharing the journey and experience of change with other schools can not only support change processes but also help to clarify focus and outcomes and provide solutions to difficulties encountered. Evidence was sought of intentions to work with other schools, including multiple campuses of collegiate structures.

C11. Monitoring/Evaluation Processes (Cuttance, Ewing)
Evidence was sought of EXPLICIT strategies for monitoring and evaluating the change processes. Both formative and summative strategies were considered. Once again examination of these stated intentions alongside later reports were of interest.

C12. Involvement of the School Community (Cumming & Owen, Fullan, Smith & Lovat)
Community in this case was defined as the community outside the immediate school, ie., parents, citizens, corporate sector etc. To some extent this criteria is related to C3. If the wider community of the school is engaged it reinforces the wholistic nature of the change. AT the same time, this project is about teacher professional learning and the short time frame may have made this a low priority for schools.

Section 3.2: Professional learning

While the literature dealing with organisational learning and the establishment of professional learning communities is more recent and less established there are still a number of factors that are emerging from the American, Canadian and Australian literature that appear to be important. Once again sources from which the factors have been identified are bracketed.

A. Team Learning (Ewing, Cuttance, Cumming & Owen, Lovat & Smith, Senge et . al)

There is much research about the importance of developing professional learning communites where the school culture encourages learning and teams of teachers learn together and from each other.

B. Networking within project team/other people in school (Ewing, Fullan, Proudford)

Opportunities for people to work together and to share what what was happening with other members of the school staff and school community were considered here.

C. Leadership (Ewing, Fullan)

As with the change dimension, research confirms that leadership is an extremely important dimension in enabling ongoing professional learning in an organisation. Those submissions that indicated that the principal or executive staff had taken the initiative or encouraged others to take leadership roles in developing the submission scored highly on this criterion.

D. Enthusiasm for learning (Ewing)

This was a difficult criterion to score using a paper submission. Nevertheless some submissions discussed their projects with passion and commitment and these scored more highly.

E. Potential for modelling within the learning project team (Ewing, Fullan)

If sustained professional learning is to occur, there needs to be opportunities for professional learning through modelling. Submissions which included opportunities for team teaching, peer mentoring and demonstrations scored highly on this criterion.

F. Regular feedback to team members/others (Fullan, Proudford)

A number of submissions incorporated regular, explicit times for feedback with other members of the team and other members of the school community. Regular times for discussion of the learning process are important in sustaining the momentum and accountability of a project.

G. Open questioning/public testing of views (Fullan)

Often the benefits of a particular change or reform are assumed and not challenged. Those projects which allowed their purposes and outcomes to be scrutinised are more likely to be well grounded in relevant research and have more sustained outcomes. Evidence of an opportunity for people outside the learning team to critique the views

of the team were looked for. Submissions that provided for the academic partner to work with teachers in investigating/coding their own teaching scored highly. This was because the academic partner was someone considered to be outside the action learning team and thus had some degree of independence or detachment and should have been more able to raise questions about the observations made related to classroom practice.

H. Explicitness of the action learning process (Fullan)
Those projects that explicitly discussed phases of the action learning process (eg, identification of the issue, planning, implementation, data gathering, reviewing and evaluating) scored highly on this criterion.

I. Success sharing/celebration (Ewing, Proudford)
Celebration of success is important in building cohesion, collegiality and self esteem. Projects which incorporated opportunities to share project outcomes and celebrate successes are more likely to be replicated in other contexts. Once again, the time frame for the projects could have made this difficult.

J. Time available for meetings/discussions about team learning (Proudford)
This criterion relates to change criterion C9, but specifically concerns opportunities for discussing learning rather than project administrative concerns.

11 Bottom up initiation v top down (Ewing)
Professional learning that is mandated from above is not as successful on its own as that which is also owned by those involved in the process at grass roots level. When both the school/organisation's leaders and the members of staff are engaged any change for learning is likely to be more successful. Evidence that people other than school leaders had been engaged in the development of the submission scored highly on this criterion.

Section 3.3: Analysis process
Each project was scored on a four point scale for each set of criteria in both change and professional learning:
1= no evidence of the criteria;
2= reading between the lines of the submission it may be possible to gain evidence of the criteria;
3= explicit evidence in the words of the submission;
4= strong explicit evidence, either in frequency of mention or in the actual outline of the criteria in the submission.

Each submission was analysed independently by two members of the evaluation team. Any disagreements on scoring were then negotiated by both members returning to look at the submission until agreement was reached. Often it was the action plan that provided more evidence than the project description, however, all elements of each submission were considered in the analysis.

Section 3.4: Results

There was no clear pattern of results in the data. For example, many projects that scored reasonably well on *change* criteria did not score highly on the *learning* criteria. The submission that scored highest (3x4 scores and 6x3 scores) on change criteria scored only 2 scores of 3 or 4 on the learning criteria. However, generally those four or five projects that scored most highly on one set of criteria scored reasonably highly on the other. The general pattern for most projects was for scores of 2 or 3 and some criteria in both change and learning attracted many scores of 1 (lack of evidence). It is important to restate here that schools did not have the criteria when writing their applications so the analysis is based on what was generated for the project.

Overall, 30 of the 50 projects attained a score of 4 for one of the change criteria and 48 scored a 3. This was in marked contrast to the learning criteria. In the latter, only 7 of the 50 projects scored a 4 on any criteria, however, 37 scored a 3. Thus, there was less explicit evidence in the submissions on the learning criteria than those of change. While this may be an artefact of the criteria themselves, it is an interesting issue in a project which has as its main focus professional learning. Results for each set of criteria are reported separately below.

Change Criteria

Tables ! and 2 provide results related to change criteria.

Table 1: strongest evidence of *change* criteria from project applications

Highest Scoring	Criteria	Frequency of Score 4	Frequency of Score 3	Comment
	C8 (Commitment of Leadership)	13	15	Strongest evidence from submissions
	C4 (Divisibility)	7	21	
	C9 (Time for Meetings/Discussions)	1	25	
	C10 (Sharing with other schools)	16	8	
	C3(Related to whole school)	8	14	

The two equally highest scoring criteria were C8 (Commitment of Leadership) and C4 (Divisibility), however, it was leadership that provided the strongest evidence in the submissions. These criteria were closely followed by C9 (Time made available for Meetings/Discussions) , C10 (Sharing with Other Schools) and C3 (Related to Whole School).

Table 2: Least evidence of *change* criteria from project applications

Lowest scoring	Criteria	Frequency of score 1(no evidence)
	C5 (Shared perception/ understanding)	35
	C6(Shared ownership)	35
	C12 (involvement of school community)	35
	C1 (Previous history of change)	24

Criteria that scored lowest included C5 (Shared perception/understanding), C6(Shared ownership) and C12 (Involvement of the School Community). Each of these had 35 projects where no evidence was found, These were followed by C1 (Previous history of Change]. The two criteria showing greatest incidence of implicit evidence (score of 2) were C11 (Explicit Monitoring/Evaluation) and C7 (Attempted Change Expressed in Concrete Terms), followed by C1 (Previous History of Change).

One project recorded scores of 3 or 4 for 9 criteria. These included C1,2,3,4,7,8,9,11,12. One project recorded scores of 3 or 4 for 8 criteria, including C2,3,7,8,9,10,11,12. Two projects scored 3 or 4 on 7 criteria. The criteria common to all of these highest scoring projects were C3(Related to Whole School),8 (Leadership),9(Time for Meetings/ Discussion), and11 (Explicit Monitoring/Evaluation). Three of the four projects also scored highly on C4 (Divisibility) and 12 (Involvement of Community).

The results presented above are discussed and interpreted in the final section.

Professional Learning:

Table 3*: Professional Learning* Criteria with most explicit evidence

Highest scoring	Criteria	Frequency of score 4	Frequency of score 3
	C3 (Leadership in Learning)	3	26
	C2(Networking)	4	19
	C10(Time for meetings about team leaning)	1	18
	C1(Team leaning)	2	15

The criteria for which there was the most explicit evidence included C3 (Leadership in Learning], 2 (Networking) . These were followed by C10 (Time available for meetings about Team Learning) and C1 (Team Learning).

Table 4: Criteria recording the lowest *professional learning* scores

Lowest scores	Criteria	Frequency of score 1
	C7(Open questioning of views)	38
	C11(Bottom up initiation)	37
	C4 (Enthusiasm for learning)	36
	C((Success sharing)	34

Criteria recording the lowest scores included C7 (Open Questioning of View), 11 (Bottom Up Initiation), 4 (Enthusiasm for Learning) and 9 (Success Sharing). Scoring on these criteria was well differentiated from other criteria. In addition, there was a high frequency of scores of 2 (implicit evidence only) on criteria C1 (Team Learning), 2 (Networking), 5 (Modelling),8 (Explicitness of Action Learning),6 (Regular Feedback) and 3 (Leadership). For criteria C 1,2,3 this strengthens evidence already reported, however, the lack of explicit evidence for C8 (Explicitness of Action Learning) is of some concern for the AGQTP.

Only 3 projects scored reasonably highly on the *learning* criteria. One gained 8 scores of 3 or 4. The criteria included C1,2,3,4,5,6,8 and 10. Two projects had scores of 3 or 4 on 7 criteria, namely C 1,2,3,5,6,8,and 10. Thus, there was a strong sharing of criteria between these three projects which included, C1 (Team Learning), 2 (Networking), 3 (Leadership),5 (Modelling), 6 (Regular Feedback), 8 (Explicitness of the Action Learning), and 10 (Time available for Meetings). Criteria C1,2,3 and 10 have all been identified already as those having greatest frequency of scores of 3 or 4.

Section 3.5: Discussion

It is important that criteria C3 (Related to Whole School), C4 (Divisibility), C8 (Leadership) and C9 (Time for Team Meetings/Discussion) in the change criteria scored so highly, although for some criteria, particularly C8 and C9 high scoring may well be a result of the submission structure. Again while high scoring on criteria C10 (Sharing With Other Schools) is significant, some of this evidence results from the number of submissions that derive from a collegiate basis.

The concern, however, is probably more with those criteria attracting little explicit evidence. These particularly include C2 (Part of the School Plan) that was specifically asked for in the submission, and related to this, C1 (Previous History of Change). Of similar concern is the lack of evidence of shared perception of the purpose of the project (C5) and shared ownership (C6). While some of this lack of evidence may be explained by the short time frame for making submissions and the timing within the school year, a lack of explicit evidence of shared development of the submission and project is of concern. A further concern raised by the data is the lack of evidence of involvement of

school communities. In a project where teachers are released from teaching for learning, one would think communication to parents and others about why this is occurring might be important.

Overall, however, submissions scored more highly for explicit evidence against the change criteria. This is of some concern when the project submissions deal with opportunities for teacher learning and when the submission proforma requests a detailed plan of action for team learning. It demonstrates the complexity of contextualising teacher professional learning within school change and will no doubt contribute to our understanding of the support schools need in developing an action learning approach.

In relation to the learning criteria, those that scored most highly were fairly predictable given the nature of the AGQTP and the submission proforma. These criteria included Team Learning, and related to this, Networking and Time Available for Meetings about Team Learning. The other criterion scoring highly was Leadership in the design of the learning processes. Once again the high scores on this criterion may reflect the structure of the submission. What is of concern is a lack of evidence for some factors that seem to be important for team learning, such as enthusiasm and celebration. It may, however, be difficult to gain evidence of this in a written submission.

An issue raised by the analysis is the low evidence of opportunities for questioning of the views/findings of team members. While it is acknowledged that for many teachers, the questioning of their practice by others is a confronting and difficult process, it is also arguable that such questioning from someone other than oneself is essential for effective evidence-based practice and changed pedagogies. It is a delicate tension that must be kept in balance.

Overall the analysis suggests that the framework for the submissions was very effective in capturing explicit evidence of some of the most important factors recognised for effective change and professional learning in schools. The fact that submissions provided more evidence of change criteria than learning may be because schools are less familiar with establishing structures for effective professional learning. This suggests there is a need for more professional development about criteria for successful learning and the establishment of professional learning communities in schools. However, the analysis also suggests some other factors that might be incorporated into future frameworks for submissions dealing with attempted classroom- and school-based change.

Phase Two: Analysis of interim progress reports

The thirty-nine interim project progress reports received by 30 January, 2004 were analysed as evidence alongside information collected during site visits for the selection of the projects chosen for case studies. In developing recommendations regarding the choice of case study sites, while responses to all questions in the report were considered, a strong emphasis was placed on those questions and responses that concentrated on action learning. Each report was categorised according to its focus on action learning and the explicitness of information provided about individual and team professional learning in relation to the NSW model of pedagogy. Attention was also paid to information in the

responses related to the various supports (ie, funding, academic partner and project manager) and how these impacted upon the action learning of project teams. There was a strong positive correlation between the results of the previous analysis of project submissions and the analysis of the progress reports.

Categorisation of the Progress reports

On the basis of question responses, and for the purposes of the evaluation team only interim reports were categorised as:

E = clear, strong explicit information about action learning

U= uncertain – those that needed further clarifying discussion by the evaluation team as to their focus on action learning

P= perfunctory or minimal

A= antagonistic

Process

The evaluation team leaders independently read and categorised each report. There was only one report of the 39 which they needed to discuss further. Other evaluation team members each independently read ten reports. At the follow up team meeting, there were nine reports that needed further consideration as to the category in which they were placed. Some reports were variable and were given both E and U ratings for different sections.

Results

There were few reports placed in the last two categories, only one as A and nine as P. This suggests that the large majority of project teams treated the reporting responsibility seriously and provided detailed information on their project's progress and anticipated directions and actions in 2004.

The majority of the 39 reports (and nearly 50% - 18) were categorised as E with a relatively large group (11) classified as 'U". This was because many reports provided few details about the action learning process. Generally, while the authors of the project reports provided detailed information about the project's context, the changes that had taken place, products such as lesson plans and units and the supporting roles of the academic partner and project manager, many responses did not provide explicit details of their action learning processes. This finding is interesting given the very strong positive responses to the usefulness of the action learning handbook. Once again, as suggested in the report analysing project submissions, the lack of detailed information in many of the progress reports regarding action learning may be evidence that many teachers in schools do not understand the nature of action learning and points to the need for further professional development around this concept and its processes.

The role of academic partners

Twenty of the interim reports were positive about the role of the academic partner. This could have been a reflection of the wording of the question that asked for a description of the academic partner's activities. Sixteen responses were descriptive or neutral about the

role of the academic partner. Two stated that to date their academic partner had played no role and there was no response from one project.

The reports documented that academic partners had provided a range of valuable roles to support the action learning projects. The most important of these was the provision of sessions related to understanding the quality teaching model and its elements including video coding and the application of model elements to classroom practice (27). Nine projects identified data gathering, analysis and feedback while three identified the role of the academic partner in the observation and coding of teachers' lessons. A further broad role included the introduction of professional ideas (14) and materials (7) along with motivating (4), facilitating discussions (4) and acting as a critical friend (9). Eight reports identified the academic partner as contributing to the progress report.

It was decided by the evaluators that focus group discussions or conversations via email would be undertaken with as many academic partners as possible in order to gain a clearer understanding of their perspectives about their involvement in the projects.

The role of the project manager

Thirty interim reports reported that the role of the project manager in her visitation and support of projects and her online communication was very important. In commenting on her projected 2004 role, the main suggestion (10) was for continued availability both physically and through e-mail. A number of schools requested knowledge of and contact with other projects, particularly those similar in character.
Twenty of the projects did not make further suggestions in this section.

As a result of the categorising process, information gathered during site visits and discussions among evaluation team members as well as with the commissioners of the evaluation, the following recommendations regarding potential case study sites were made. These are detailed below.

Case Study Recommendations

In making final decisions in regard to possible case study sites the evaluation team and the commissioners chose projects that included a range of demographic characteristics in urban, rural and remote locations and which employed different models and approaches to action learning and its support. There was also an attempt to include a balance of primary and secondary and small and large schools as well as a school for specific purposes. The suggested possible project sites and reasons for their selection are provided below. Pseudonyms are used to protect each school's anonymity

STANTON HIGH - regional city, secondary, technology and literacy, interesting SES, small group of staff involved, strong support from principal, distributive leadership, demonstrated enthusiasm.

WARTARRA Special School - literacy, reflective journals, high motivation, full staff involvement, responding to the issue of the appropriateness of the quality teaching model for high needs students, videoing of lessons so that students would not be distracted.

VALLEY VIEW HIGH - isolated rural, literacy across the curriculum, student survey, across faculty leadership, indigenous students, leadership role within school, established community of practice. Interesting contrast with Stanton
or KERRIGAL HIGH - rural, draws from isolated settlements, years 7 & 8, ICT.

COLLEGIATE CAMPUS - college model, range of KLAs, unit development. While this report was not strong against all criteria, in the opinion of the evaluation team, it was felt a collegiate case study was merited and this project was the strongest candidate.

PLAINS PRIMARY - multiage classes, rural, small primary, development of units/teaching strategies with release time.

COAST- collection of small schools, interesting models eg across school locations of teacher pairs, building of professional network, and issues, principals almost disengaging from project, backward mapping
or HIGHGROUND - more disparate group, working in stages, principal providing strong leadership, very focussed around technology.

EPOCH PRIMARY - city, strong principal support, strong on criteria, high transient population, interesting action learning process, strong relationship with academic partner.
or CARROW – city, initial upskilling of executive then whole staff, mathematics.

MACMILLAN PARK - Stage 5 student involvement. Again this report was not strong on all criteria and there was little evidence of principal support but the student involvement was considered important.

CALISTA - high indigenous population, small school
or HYACINTH - academic partner's input, teacher buddying, science & technology
or TAMAR - small school, concerned to confront a range of experienced teachers.

Given the time frame for the completion of the case studies, the complexity of two of the recommendations (i.e small schools and special schools) and the other professional commitments of the team, it was suggested that nine case studies be undertaken. The nine were Stanton, Wartarra, Valley View, Collegiate, Plains, Coast, Epoch, Macmillan Park and Hyacinth. At the request of the DET evaluation management team Epoch was changed for Carrow. Letters to principals and project coordinators were distributed in week two, Term 1.

Section 4:Findings from the analysis of final evaluation reports

Nearly all projects (48) submitted final evaluation reports. All project coordinators submitting reports had taken the reporting process seriously and had generally provided detailed responses to the questions asked. This section reports the main findings from an analysis of those reports. Initially the specific issue is identified and then results are briefly summarised. In the interests of brevity, the number of projects reporting a specific issue is indicated in brackets where appropriate.

Responses to items

Changes to project and project team

Thirty six projects reported changes from 2003. Main changes were in staff joining or leaving the team due to transfer or retirement and/or changes in the allocation of staff to particular stages or classes. A number of projects mentioned the need to bring new members 'up to speed' during Term 1.

Project activities in Term 1.

All reports indicated strong project activity in Term 1, 2004. Eighteen projects reported that they had begun to use the NSW model of pedagogy in Term 1, 2004. This meant that for these projects, the majority of their work on pedagogy occurred over a maximum of 10 weeks. Six additional projects reported using the introductory materials for quality teaching during Term 1. Of these 24 projects, 14 reported showing and coding the project videos. One project only stated that they had undertaken professional development explicitly on action learning.

One of the major activities reported was that of planning (30), either one of, or a combination of lessons (8), units/programs (16), assessment tasks (6). Seven projects reported 'backmapping' existing teaching resources against the quality teaching elements. Eleven projects reported trialing/implementing lessons/units/programs developed during Term 4,2003. Four were engaged in evaluating work completed during that time.

One of the most popular activities was the videoing and coding according to the *Classroom practice guide* coding categories, either self or peer coding (20) or coding by academic partner (2). Twenty two projects reported some form of critical reflective discussion between team members while 12 held wider faculty or school meetings focused on quality teaching. Two projects included interviews with students and one with parents.

From all information available, while activity level related to the action learning project was fairly high, much of this was still in the early phase of introducing the NSW model of pedagogy. Such evidence reinforces the conclusion that the time frame for a majority of projects was much less than two terms and that most project activity was during Term 1, 2004.

Evidence of teacher professional learning
41 of the 48 reports made some claim as to evidence of professional learning. Four of these referred to a specific KLA with no mention of the NSW model. The most common evidence was that of claimed changes observed in planning and teaching practice (34), particularly those related to the incorporation of elements of the NSW model into lessons/units/programs (26), assessment tasks or student work samples (17).

Other changes in teachers' practices reported dealt with peer relationships. Sixteen projects suggested there had been positive changes in levels of collaboration and in teacher confidence and their willingness to risk and trust. The action learning project had acted as a stimulus to investigate practice towards change (8).

Evidence claims of changes to practice were followed closely by records/ observations of discussions and meetings (32) and the increased use of metalanguage by teachers in staff rooms and classrooms (25). A range of other forms of evidence was documented including audiotapes (3), photographs (7), videos (12), DVD (2), CD ROM (1) and presentations to either staff meetings or conferences (7) which was often linked to increased confidence and willingness to risk. 21 projects reported the use of some form of reflective journal/diary and 18, video coding sheets by peers or academic partners.

Professional Learning. Every report included insights about teacher professional learning. The most frequent issue was that of time required (39), the necessary release from class teaching and regular (2) time to meet and reflect (30). Four projects commented on the longitudinal nature of teacher learning and three, that such learning was very time consuming.

There were, however, some other important insights reported about professional learning. These included the need for teachers to own the learning process (12) and that any learning had to be relevant to teachers' every day professional needs (22). Teamwork and collegiality was deemed to be important (20) as was, particularly in secondary schools, working with people outside your own KLA. The latter was seen as deepening understanding and professional discussion (12). While locating the learning inside the school was seen as important by some (4), the support and perspective of people outside the school was also confirmed (8).

Some reports identified other essential ingredients of effective professional learning. These included that individual teachers moved at their own pace (8) so that learning had to occur in small steps (4) but there needed to be a balance of pressure and support (5). Mutual trust and respect was essential in any learning team (5). It was observed that action learning cycles were a useful model to generate learning and reflection (4) and that they could also increase levels of trust and respect as well as levels of commitment, confidence and enthusiasm (5). Two projects reported that they had found there needed to be a language for teachers to share and use in their learning.

Action learning as a form of professional development towards school change
As might be expected, since the project was based on action learning, there was a range of comments about action learning by all projects. The most frequent comment by far was that action learning had great potential for professional development and change (5) and provided a strong positive model, particularly working with a core team of teachers (24) for potential whole school change (6). Action learning was recognised as providing, a positive reason for change (7), teacher ownership of their learning (15) which in turn was directed at everyday practice (8).

The opportunity action learning provided for learning about other KLAs/subjects was recognised (8) as was the opportunity to meet the individual needs of teachers (3). A number of reports again commented on the amount of time necessary for effective action learning (12), the need for mutual support in (4), and whole school support of any learning project (2), as well as the potential for affirmation of teachers and their work by someone working in a learning project and external to the school (4).

Nine projects asserted that any action learning project needed to be carefully planned and coordinated, and be purposeful and well resourced. Only one project suggested that gathering evidence of learning was important. This project provided explicit data in a teacher comment to the effect that the teacher would not have believed his practice except that he heard it clearly on the audiotape.

Academic partners. The very large majority of reports (44) recorded that they were satisfied with the work of their academic partner. Only one project suggested that they would not want an academic partner in the future. The most important role of the academic partner was reported as that of 'critical friend' (33). Often the exact nature of this role was not specified but other comments suggest, guiding and focusing the project but leaving the ownership and pace of the project in the hands of team members (15); understanding both the reality of schools generally and the particular school context (10); being affirming of teachers' knowledge and practice and building on this while challenging constructively (14); in a friendly and supportive manner (6).

The main role identified for the academic partner was that of introducing the NSW model of pedagogy and leading teams to an interpretive understanding of it within the context of the particular school and team members (14). Eight reports commented on the specific KLA knowledge of the academic partner (usually maths, science and/or ICT). These were reports coming from projects that reported a greater emphasis upon a particular KLA. Only seven projects reported that the academic partner employed knowledge and skills of action learning. This is of some concern given that the project was based in the processes of action learning. Other roles of academic partners identified were those of resource providers (6) and evaluators (3). The accessibility of the academic partner was seen as important (6) as was the possibility of a future and enhanced relationship with the school (4).

Even though comments related to academic partners were positive and strong 40 reports made suggestions as to how relationships could be improved. The most frequent and

most strongly expressed suggestion was a clarification of the specific roles that could be played by academic partners and expectations of both them and the school in any action learning project (15). Early contact between schools and possible academic partners was suggested. This included direct opportunity for the school to be involved in the appointment of their academic partners (5), particularly those schools who had an already established relationship, and the engagement of the academic partner in planning the action learning project (8).

Ten projects reported that they would have liked to have more frequent contact with their academic partner, particularly related to classroom observation (4). However, some would have liked a more local and accessible academic partner (3) and two projects would have wanted a more flexible arrangement with their academic partner.

Effective strategies.
In responding to the question concerning the action learning elements that participants thought worked well, the very large majority (36) reported the collaboration and collegiality of staff, particularly across KLAs and across schools, especially in learning teams (10) and sometimes engaging the whole school (4) . Supporting this, 18 projects nominated the opportunity for release and meeting time for team participants and continued meetings to apply the quality teaching model (10). Other effective learning activities included peer and academic partner observations (7) including videoing lessons (5) and coding (1), resource development (3) and implementing the model through faculties and KLAs (3). Two projects suggested their work with students was very effective and a similar number nominated the use of journals.

Strategies necessary to build towards positive change.
Thirty eight projects reported that they needed to extend the work undertaken in the action learning project. Only one project explicitly mentioned extending the use of action learning. Four projects did indicate, however that they intended to pursue extension of the project to other staff in the school, other faculties/KLAs and into other areas of practice, particularly, assessment. Such extension could only be achieved through time for meetings (19) including meetings to continue work on the quality teaching model (12). A number of activities for these meetings were suggested, including peer observation (3) and coding of lessons (3), sharing of projects (3), reflection on the project so far (3) and evaluation (3). Two reports specifically mentioned that they would use school professional development monies to support their extension work and four projects suggested that they would continue work with their academic partner.

Future activities
Nine projects nominated implementing products from the action learning project and evaluating the impact of that project while five projects reported that they intended to publish materials that emerged from their action learning project in either hard copy or on the web. Three projects suggested that they had school development days planned.

Doing things differently
It was again 'time' that was the overwhelming focus for suggested change (36/48). Most of the comments dealt with the selection of school terms. There was strong criticism of the use of terms four and one. Both terms were regarded as highly problematic. The other comment on time was the short length of the action learning project.

Twelve projects reported that they would undertake greater preparation within the school prior to engaging in any action learning project. Such preparation included selection of learning teams, building collegiality, risk and trust, greater preparatory work on quality teaching and engaging the academic partner earlier (8). Three projects reported that they would plan to put a much greater emphasis on evidence for the impact of the action learning project.

Other changes suggested were to increase the number of team participants (5), to decrease the team from whole school to a smaller more strategic team (2), having a more specific project focus (1) with more explicitly defined team roles(1) and more strategically chosen classes on which to focus the learning project (1). Three projects suggested that they would pay their academic partner less.

Conclusion
In conclusion, reports suggest a high level of project activity during Term 1, 2004. They also claim a great deal of evidence for the impact of the action learning project, mainly changes in teacher planning and teaching practices and the language used to talk about these. The importance of ownership and focusing on professional needs is recognised as is the powerful potential for action learning as a model of professional development and to bring about both individual and school change. There is strong positive comment regarding the role of academic partners with strong suggestion that they become engaged with the school earlier in any action learning project.

The large majority of reports suggested that they will continue with some extension of the work completed. Most of this extension is related to the NSW model of pedagogy, while only four projects suggest that they plan to use action learning specifically. While a large majority of criticisms relate to the timing and time frame of the project, all project reports affirm the importance of the funding that has provided the opportunity for release from classroom teaching and to collaborate in meeting, planning, evaluating and reflecting.

Data from the final evaluation reports from each project reported in this section provide useful patterns of the activities that have occurred within the 50 projects of the *Action learning for school teams.* They also reveal the importance of the specific details of each school context in the design, organization and experience of the action learning project and the issues confronted. What is not revealed, however, are the reasons for the manner in which activities have been selected and constructed and the issues that have emerged in the project sites related to action learning. Such information is central to both the focus of the evaluation and its central question. The individual case studies reported in the following section provide some of this information.

Section 5– Case Studies

The eight cases were chosen in an attempt to represent the diversity of the contexts in which projects were located and the demographics of students, staff and communities: some were located in Sydney, some in remote rural towns; some were large schools, some were small; some were primary, some secondary. They were also selected to attempt to illustrate the range of approaches: some of small teams within schools; some whole schools: some across schools: some within specific KLAs; some across KLAs.

The projects chosen are not necessarily exemplars of action learning or professional learning communities within or across schools. They do not necessarily represent the 'best' in the 50 projects of the '*Action learning for school teams*' program. Indeed there are other projects that could have easily been included equally with those here.

All of the cases raise important issues about action learning and about the professional development and learning of teachers in schools. All have something to tell us about how to organise and structure such professional learning more effectively. They have been chosen and are offered as examples that may be used by other schools to clarify thinking and ideas about developing action learning as a form of professional development for teachers within their own contexts.

The cases have been organised using similar sub-headings in the interests of brevity and accessibility. All of the case study accounts have been verified by project participants. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of schools, projects and participants. In stating this, however, most of the project schools would have preferred to be identified.

Features of the case study schools

Although these case studies have focussed on action learning teams and, in particular, the quality teaching framework, it is clear that each school profiled provides an exemplar of some aspect(s) of a professional learning community (Senge,1990, 2000, Hopkins,1998, Ewing, 2002). The important contextual features of such communities are indicated briefly below:

Interactive leadership is supported and encouraged by the principal and executive. Classroom practitioners are encouraged to support and lead each other. Achievements are recognised and celebrated.

Professional learning is a priority at the school. The principal knows that all staff are capable of professional growth and finds resources to enable staff to undertake professional development activities. The staff are keen to learn from each other. In each school profiled, district consultants have provided valuable input alongside Academic Partners in shaping the initiatives.

Effective communication strategies are evident. There are established and workable structures to ensure that everyone is aware of what is happening in the school. It is also clear that staff are made aware of relevant policy and documents and provided with professional development opportunities to understand the implications

A collaborative community where stakeholders in the school community know they have a voice and will be listened to. In a number of the case study schools parents take an important role in school management committees and participate in school decision making.

Enthusiasm is evident within the school community alongside commitment and hard work. Staff are genuinely keen to learn and are given the opportunity to control their learning.

Curriculum initiatives are a feature of the school. The initiatives focussed upon in each case study are but one of a number of curriculum projects underway to improve students' achievements of syllabus outcomes.

Carrow Primary School

School Context
Carrow Public School is a large, friendly primary school with 25 classes and 40 staff. It is situated in Sydney's south west and draws students from a diverse range of backgrounds. At least 80% of the 725 strong student population have NESB backgrounds with a significant proportion from lower socio-economic families. All members of the school's executive team are experienced teachers with most having more than a decade of classroom teaching. A number of the executive have been at the school for some time and commented on how much they enjoyed being part of the school community.

Prior Professional Learning
Following the introduction of district workshops based on the discussion paper, a number of teachers attended a session by the Assistant Director, Professional Support and Curriculum. Interest in the document was stimulated. Teachers were keen to trial and implement quality teaching strategies in their own classes.

The school had no prior experience of working with an academic partner. The project team hoped that the academic partner would act as a critical friend throughout the project by providing professional learning experiences around the quality teaching document and the concept of action learning.

Project Context
Mathematics was chosen as the project focus. The executive team (four assistant principals and a deputy principal) and the mathematics coordinator formed the project team. Each assistant principal is responsible for the coordination of a stage within the school. The school executive team decided on the project's direction and the deputy principal subsequently wrote the funding submission.

[1] Unless otherwise stated, statements in italics are derived from interviews with members of the Project Team in March, 2004.

Action Learning
Carrow's project, 'Embedding *Working Mathematically* into Classroom Practice' concentrated initially on upskilling the executive team in an understanding of both the new mathematics syllabus and the NSW model of pedagogy. Following this, in Term 1, 2004 the executive team, having built consistent expectations, worked with the whole staff on upskilling them in using the new model in numeracy. It was anticipated in Term 2, 2004, that each project team member would then 'buddy' a teacher working in the same stage.

The project had all the elements of an action learning project: it took the *Working Mathematically* strand of the mathematics syllabus along with implementation of the NSW model as its authentic workplace focus. Team members worked collaboratively to understand how both documents could be implemented at Carrow . They came together to plan, discuss their understandings, reflect and evaluate their classroom practices.

Initially the project team analysed the discussion paper with the help of their academic partner, choosing to focus on all elements of each of the three dimensions. They then examined their own classroom practices in the light of the document using the coding manual.

At the same time, the district mathematics consultant, inserviced the project team on the new *Working Mathematically* strand of the K-6 Mathematics syllabus. Team members then reflected on their classroom practice and worked to refine their strategies using understandings from both documents alongside feedback from their colleagues. They also observed in each other's classrooms.

Every team session included professional dialogue based on the observations in each other's classrooms and reflection. Interviews with the members of the project team indicated that this process had been very affirming and, while demonstrating areas to refine, also showed that they were effective classroom teachers. Team members felt that the most observable change in their classrooms stemmed from a new understanding of the *Working Mathematically* component of the Mathematics syllabus.

Team members also articulated that they developed a consistency about their expectations in terms of supervision of their stage and what they would like to see evidence of in every classroom at Carrow. In this way the project coordinator's aim: 'to have a common language and a common understanding of what we thought as an executive team' was achieved.

Term 1, 2004 saw the project team inservice the whole Carrow staff on the use of the quality teaching elements in the teaching of numeracy. The mathematics consultant worked with the whole school, particularly focussing on the *Working Mathematically* strand of the mathematics syllabus.

Teachers in each stage then worked together to identify the range of dimensions and elements that are used by classroom teachers. These were then reflected on using the quality teaching coding manuals and in relation to *Working Mathematically*.

Project team members then chose a buddy working on the same stage to mentor. Each pair observed each other's lessons, engaged in team teaching and subsequently reflected and discussed the lessons using both the mathematics and quality teaching documents. 'The DET videos were synthetic. When we taught for each other it was more meaningful'.

Leadership
The project team were full of praise for the deputy principal who coordinated the project. 'It takes a lot to do this and it has been smooth.' Despite the difficulties that arose, the project was very professionally organised with colour coded folders, careful organization, a tight time frame etc.

External Support
The Project Manager
The NSW DET project manager was always ready to answer questions. The project coordinator found her to be 'fabulous': very professional and supportive. Her 'wealth of knowledge' of quality teaching also enabled her to be very helpful and practical. Team members found the manuals and the *Action Learning* handbook useful. There were some technical coordination problems that were beyond the project manager's control that the school found frustrating.

Funding
The funding was crucial to the success of the project. It allowed for input from both the academic partner and the mathematics consultant. It also provided the necessary release time for the project team members to observe each other, reflect on this and later to work with their buddy teachers. 'Release time for executive has been excellent'.

The Mathematics Consultant
For this project, the expertise of the mathematics consultant was much valued. 'Her knowledge and expertise has put it all in a different light'.

Role of the Academic Partner
The project team felt unanimously that the academic partner 'had provided a valuable professional viewpoint along with feedback' in relation to the quality teaching framework. He was described as an excellent communicator who was able to bridge the artificialities of the video information and provide "the link between the jargon and the reality". He "Carrow.-ised it." In addition, he was able to affirm the team who were much more negative about their teaching than he was.

There was some feeling that it would have been beneficial to have involved the academic partner with the whole staff development day had funding and availability permitted.

Issues

- Every staff member who was interviewed highlighted the staging of the process over Term 4 and Term 1 of two separate years as an issue. The following comment is representative of the team's frustrations:

  The biggest hiccup has been the time frame for the second phase of the project – the whole staff implementation. The six week holiday break
  led to a loss of momentum and was a real shame given the whole executive team was really excited and enthused.

- The deputy principal who coordinated the project also felt that it may have been more useful to move more quickly to working in stage teams. She felt that perhaps the first phase of the project took too long.

- There were, however, some other unforeseen difficulties associated with the project: the coordinator was ill for several sessions in Term 1 and there were other problems: 'Even power problems put us behind.' Whole staff professional learning sessions had to be rescheduled and this in turn led to a loss of momentum. As one team member commented: 'I think we would have got more on board if we hadn't lost the flow'.

- Despite largely following the schedule outlined in the project submission, the project team felt they ran out of time: 'We needed more time. There wasn't enough time to watch each other teach. The staff will need more time to access and implement the whole project'.

- The project team members also felt that three terms within the same calendar year would have been much more realistic.

- There was some feeling that the learning had not yet been as productive for the whole staff as it had been for the executive team. These feelings are reflected in the following comments from project team members:

  The whole staff needed input from the Academic Partner and the whole day release – more funding would enable this. We haven't had time to make and use our own videos with the whole staff and have had to use DET contrived videos.

  If the project was more concentrated and whole day opportunities were provided for the whole staff it would get further.

  It would have been good if T. could be more involved in inservicing the whole staff but it would have cost more. Inservicing the staff at staff meetings by us was more fragmented.

Conclusion

The project team members who were interviewed were unanimous in their conviction that they would commit to such a project again. 'The project was scoped well for teachers at all stages of their professional journey, from experienced to pre service teachers'. Team members found the action learning process a wonderful professional development model. The increased understanding of the quality teaching and mathematics syllabus was evident across the school as the following comments demonstrate:

> *Our knowledge of quality teaching has definitely broadened;*
>
> *I was pleased to see the dimension of narrative included as it does enhance learning;*
>
> *I am very thankful to have had the opportunity to look at ourselves and evaluate our teaching.*

The bonding of the school executive was also an important outcome. 'The project has brought us together as an executive'. The mentoring and observing of each other's practice was also felt to be a great strength of the project. 'There was the same collegiality amongst the leadership when sharing with staff'.

Not all staff have embraced the project. 'Some are very enthusiastic and excited, others feel they need more time to see its value for themselves'.

This case study demonstrates how a professional learning community can be created through a shared vision and opportunities for release time to plan, observe classroom practice, reflect and discuss. The importance of sustaining momentum over an extended time frame is also highlighted. The following quote from the final report provides an apt conclusion:

> It requires time and resources to allow teachers to reflect on and discuss their teaching practices. In order for this to occur staff need time to take new ideas on board…Effective learning also requires regular and meaningful professional dialogue, in whole school and/or Stage teams rather than 'one-off' presentations without follow up…working collaboratively allows people to contribute from their area of expertise and different perspectives *in ways that deepen the substance of professional discussion.*

Coast Case Study

School Context
Thirty-two teachers who were engaged in the Coast *Action learning for school teams* project. The schools involved had strong diversity in location, size and demographics. Some were P5&6 schools where the release of a teacher for the day was nearly impossible. Other schools drew on larger populations, were located on major highways and had 10 or more teaching staff.

The case has been developed from the observations of two of the whole group workshops in 2004 and interviews with 12 participants in 5 of the project schools. These include the initial project coordinator and two of the original planning team and all members of the final project coordination team.

Prior Professional Learning
Prior to the application for funding, and after the release of the discussion paper, several professional development events had occurred in Coast project schools to introduce the NSW model of pedagogy. These included:

- talk about the discussion paper in principals' meetings;
- professional development sessions delivered by the DET District CEO, Teaching and learning; and,
- after school professional development sessions on the NSW model in one of the larger schools by the school coordinator, teaching and learning.

Project Context
The submission for funding was prepared by the principal who also became the project coordinator. He was assisted by a principal and deputy from one of the larger schools and the District CEO, Teaching & Learning. The proposal was sweeping in its design and logistics. It included ten schools, one offshore, with possibly 60 teachers, many casual and RFF, in relatively isolated locations. It was based on across-school teacher pairs planning and teaching multi stage units of work and observing each other's teaching. The units would be in science and technology, which according to the schools' self evaluations, was the KLA in which most teachers felt least confident and was often given to casual and RFF teachers. To support teachers in the proposed project the district science & technology consultant was also involved.

Action Learning
The planned project involved four whole team meetings (2 in 2003 and 2 in 2004). These were interspersed with teacher pair activities of planning and teaching, peer observations and reflective discussion.

The first activity was after school in Term 4, 2003 at a central non-school location. This consisted of presentations of the NSW model of pedagogy by the academic partner. The group then watched and coded one of the project videos. After the presentations, using a template, participants were provided with time to work with their peer partner(s) to begin planning their unit.

The second whole group meeting occurred after school hours in December, 2003, four weeks after the first workshop. The theme of this workshop was embedding assessment in quality teaching. The workshop followed a similar pattern to the first. The academic partner initially presented ideas around the theme and then participant pairs/teams worked together to continue planning their unit and assessment tasks.

From all evidence, not a great deal of activity took place from Term 4, 2003 to Term 1, 2004, although some pairs did begin their planning. In fact, it is the break between these two years that is recognised by a number of participants as causing loss of momentum in project activity. A number of events also took place between the end of 2003 and the start of 2004 that created difficulties. First, there was an extraordinary movement of staff into, out of and across schools, partly caused by unusual changes in student numbers. This included the appointment of three new principals including one offshore. Second, unusual rain, caused difficulty for some of the teacher pairs to meet. Third was the potential inability of the academic partner to continue with the project because of her then enforced return to fulltime teaching in a school.

The third workshop was held on the designated professional development day of Term 1, 2004. While some 35 teachers had been expected 28 attended. Unlike the first workshops, time for teachers to work in their teams, using a template designed to facilitate reflection on their planning and the incorporation of the elements of the NSW model, was maximised. Interviewees reported that it was this well structured third workshop that provided an important stimulus both to re-engage a number of participants and to the high level of activity that then followed in the teacher pairs during Term 1. It was during this term that most of the development of the science & technology units occurred and the pair teaching and observations took place.

A further critical factor was the unexpected retirement of the project coordinator. A principal, one of the original planning group, assumed the role of project coordinator and another principal was added to the coordinating team.

Interviewees suggested that while the broad purposes of the project were clear (to pair plan, and develop a unit in science & technology based on selected elements of the NSW model of pedagogy using ICT and then observe each other teaching) the specific purposes and goals for each pair/team arose as the planning and development progressed.

The final workshop held in the latter half of Term 1, although attended by only 22 participants, demonstrated not only the level of activity that had taken place but the quality of both the teacher developed units and teacher learning, and the student learning experiences and outcomes. Through reflective group processes participants reported on the units they had developed and the associated learning activities. This was supported by student work samples. There was clear evidence of not only exciting and innovative activities but of high levels of engagement in challenging tasks using deep problematic knowledge that was culturally appropriate. There was also evidence of students using metalanguage and self direction. A number of the participants reported that their teaching

practices, not only in science & technology, had changed as a result of the project and its activities. There was clear evidence from the presentations and teacher talk that participants' understanding and confidence in planning and teaching interesting, engaging and significant lessons in science & technology had increased substantially.

Leadership
Leadership was an important factor in the Coast project. While there was arguably strong leadership to develop the submission for funds this was not apparently maintained. As the project progressed it was leadership from the DET external support that became much more important.

It became apparent during the interviews that there was a high level of commitment and responsibility between participants and their peer partners. As the project progressed and numbers of participants decreased at the whole-group workshops, the work of the pairs and teams continued effectively to achieve their own and the project's outcomes.

External Support
An important factor in the success of the Coast *Action learning for school teams* project was the support provided by the DET in conducting the four workshops.

Role of Academic Partner
There were a substantial number of participants interviewed who expected that an academic partner would be someone who not only had expert knowledge of the NSW model but also the expertise to enter participants' classrooms and demonstrate the model with participants' classes. This is not, however, just a matter of expertise. Even when the academic partner offered to come to classrooms during Term 1, 2004, a number of participants did not invite her because, not only was it 'too late', but because of a perceived lack of credibility in her ability to work in their classroom contexts.

Issues
Project participants interviewed overwhelmingly reported that they would engage in an action learning program again (10/12 interviewees). They also stated that action learning was maybe 'the most successful form of professional development ever undertaken because of its relevance to everyday school needs and practice', and its 'collaborative and evolving, ongoing nature' with a 'long term commitment to your colleague, resulting in people thinking more and acting in improved ways'.

Difficulties and suggested changes included:

- it would have been better to have a project on a smaller scale with fewer schools and teachers involved. This suggestion mainly stemmed from participants in the bigger schools where the logistics of release and organization were more complex.

- a perceived lack of 'big picture planning'. It was clearly recognised that any professional development activity of the complexity and magnitude of the Coast project required very detailed, specific and strategic planning and strong, frequent

communication. It was also reported by interviewees that such planning and communication had not always been achieved, with both the academic partner and participants.

- interviewees' expectation was that they would be released for project activities or paid for after-school hours. This, they claimed had not always occurred, and they had found themselves having to use RFF and their own time to complete these activities

- the project team needed to play a stronger role in the allocation of any academic partner and in clarification of the role, specific duties and time frame for the academic partner.

- other characteristics perceived as being desirable in an academic partner included deep knowledge and understanding of relevant subject matter, a high level of interpersonal skills, able to motivate, enthuse and mentor and provide useful relevant resources. These together are a collection of very demanding expectations for any academic partner to meet, and have major implications regarding both the identification and roles of academic partners in any future professional development projects. Such expectations also have significant implications for the amount of time any academic partner may be expected to spend in a partnership. In turn, this has implications for universities and the manner in which such work with schools is recognised as a legitimate part of an academic's workload.

- timing across Term 4 and Term 1, was the strongest perceived barrier to the effectiveness of the project.

- the process of selecting peer partners had not occurred as effectively as it might have. They reported, insufficient information about each other and pressure of time at the first whole group meeting meant that some pairs/teams encountered difficulties later because of mismatches. Changes in staff and class allocations often exacerbated this original difficulty.

- the strong recommendation that meetings/workshops for professional development should occur on professional development days rather than after school or on separate release days. <u>After-school activities in isolated locations created childcare difficulties.</u>

- project funds could be distributed to each participating school rather than be held in one school.

Conclusions

The factors that were most important in enabling teachers to use action learning as a professional development tool were identified in workshop activities and interviews.

- All participants nominated the funds provided in the project as essential to their effective action learning creating both time and opportunity to meet, collaborate and share.

- The opportunity to work collegially in pairs and teams to plan and develop units and to share the results of this work was seen as a very important element of their action learning.

- The large group workshops were seen as less effective than the paired and team planning, developing, observing and reflecting.

The Coast project was arguably the largest, most complex in its logistics and the most ambitious of any of the *Action learning for school teams* projects. A significant number of teachers disengaged from the action learning project, and although in hindsight there were changes that may have made the passage of the project smoother, there is no doubt that many of the ambitious outcomes originally anticipated were achieved. Participants' talk about their pedagogy, their presentations and work samples provide clear evidence of their greater understanding and confidence both about the NSW model of pedagogy and the science and technology syllabus. Participants have expressed their commitment to keep working to reflect upon and improve their teaching. In addition, generally participants commented favourably on their learning about action learning, suggesting that this is a model that they would like to continue to use as a basis for their professional development and improvement of their teaching.

Hyacinth Public School

School context
Hyacinth Public School is set in a small rural township. The school population includes students with challenging behaviours and language deprivation. Additionally there is a large ratio of boys to girls.

While the school has a very experienced staff, there is also an early career teacher. The staff are both friendly and enthusiastic and a strong social and support network is evident in the staffroom.

Prior professional learning
This case study is based on interviews with the six project team members. These interviews were conducted in pairs. Teachers who participated in the interviews commented frequently that the principal takes an active, supportive and 'hands on' approach to leadership. He and his executive staff have a firm belief that an investment in staff professional learning will improve student learning outcomes.

Teachers feel they are committed to a common vision: that of improving equity through providing opportunities for all their students. They are all focussed on whole school change. A wide range of innovative projects were already underway in the school.

Project context
The six team members volunteered to be involved in the project. They chose a science and technology focus through which to implement elements of the NSW model. This focus was already part of their school plan and therefore sustainable long term. Boys' education and literacy were also integrated with this curriculum focus.

Action Learning
At their first team meeting the team shared their goals with their academic partner who suggested they concentrate on a few of the NSW model of pedagogy's elements and think about 'buddying up'.

All teachers chose elements and it is interesting to note that there was a unanimous initial selection of the 'student engagement' element. Other elements chosen included 'higher order thinking',' student self regulation' and 'connectedness'. Consultants were also invited to the school to support the learning process. Each pair devised their own approach to implementing aspects of the discussion paper through the science and technology KLA.

The action learning team then engaged in professional reading to improve their knowledge and understanding in science & technology – they thus moved, in their words, outside their 'comfort zone'. Each buddy worked differently but there were common elements within their projects. Each pair observed their buddy's lessons and provided feedback afterwards – only one pair chose to use the coding sheet. The language of the model helped them developed a shared understanding and terminology and all

interviewed felt this proved to be more beneficial than the actual coding process. Other pairs commented that they felt the coding could undermine less confident teachers. Some partners used videotaping and digital cameras to record their teaching, and in retrospect would have done more of this as it proved a valuable reflection aid.

Teachers felt confident enough to invite the academic partner to observe their lessons and they found his feedback very affirming. In fact, they found his comments less critical than their own self evaluations. A number of those interviewed commented on his excellent listening skills.

The observations of each others' teaching was very productive and teachers felt they gained an enormous amount from these sessions. As one of the team commented: 'Seeing someone else teach is really powerful – you're never too old to learn from someone else'. The feedback and reflection opportunities provided a catalyst for the next paired session together. As one team member said: 'It takes someone to be there with you to push'. One member of the project team used a learning journal and found it very valuable – the others have found her journal a useful reference.

Parents and students were informed of both the project and the quality teaching framework and kept in touch with activities via the school newsletter and school assemblies.

The transition to a new year/new class/new stage with, in some cases, a combination of students who had been involved in 2003 and some who had not, proved a challenge. In Term 1, 2004 some teachers chose new elements to focus on and there was some 'buddying' (some successful/some less so) of those teachers who had been involved in 2003 and those who were new to the project classes.

Leadership

The principal was very supportive throughout the project and is now seeking to broaden it to embrace all staff. The project coordinator, who wrote the submission, was described by all members of the project team and the principal as a collaborative facilitator, a good communicator and organiser, a risk taker.

The Role of the Academic Partner

The academic partner helped shape the plan – he suggested that the team target one or two achievable components of the NSW model. He was experienced with the process of action learning, was practical and provided reassurance as well as helping with project writing.

> *He was incisive, understanding, helpful with resources, prepared to observe in the classrooms. He kept us together and focussed on what we wanted to get out of the project….We never felt threatened.*

External Support

The Project Manager

Team members commented that the NSWDET project manager was very supportive in multiple ways.

Funding

The project team members interviewed identified funding support as very important. It enabled both the academic partner and other experts to provide input as well as much needed release time for reflection and discussion both in pairs and as a team. Science resources were also purchased,

Issues

There were three issues that were identified during the interviews:

- the timing of the project
- the team members commented that they would have welcomed more frequent visits from the academic partner if feasible (i.e. affordable)
- in retrospect the teachers felt they would have undertaken more videoing and photographing of the science and technology activities.

Conclusions

There are many project outcomes, both intended and unintended.

- The team is highly enthusiastic about continuing their professional learning and the rest of the staff is keen to come on board.
- The targeting of science and technology has led to a renewed valuing of this KLA across the whole school. This is partly because the consultants that visited the school worked with the whole school. In addition, much informal sharing about quality teaching between the team and the rest of the staff happened in the staff room. As time progressed learning in science 'became deeper rather than wider'; 'the children now see themselves as scientists'.
- All members of the project team describe themselves as 'now comfortable with the quality teaching model'. Initially some team members had felt overwhelmed by the eighteen elements but now all feel more confident. Several team members expressed their relief that they had been able to focus on a few elements rather than hold all of them in their head at once when coming to terms with the framework.
- The project team felt that students have been very motivated and excited about the design and make science and technology projects that have eventuated. ' Students have become more aware of what they want to learn and will ask why they are learning this – our audience has changed'.

- Many of the parents have commented on the way this student engagement has impacted on home activities.
- Class charts have been developed to monitor social support. Students have been challenged to take more responsibility for their own learning. This is of interest because initially student 'self regulation' was not a specific focus.
- Increased reflective thinking is reported as another important outcome, both for teachers and students. Students have been encouraged to think about what they have

learned, what interested them, what would they like to find out more about, what helped and hindered their learning. Project teachers have also reflected on their practice and their students' responses both with their partners and across the team. As one teacher commented: 'the pedagogical change has led to personal change'.

- Factual writing has been a focus and some teachers have developed proformas as scaffolds for writing in science.
- The project team has valued opportunities to present at conferences. The celebration of their achievements has 'validated our work and provided additional motivation to continue'.
- All team members also articulate an appreciation and understanding of action learning as a process for teacher professional learning, describing it as both 'exciting and fun'.

Why has it worked at Hyacinth?

- There was a strong existing collegial climate supportive of professional learning.
- The principal was prepared to relieve teachers to provide more meeting time for the project team. One teacher remarked:

> *The culture at this school is perfect for action learning because it is so open. There is rapport and professional trust between teachers. The curriculum is negotiated and cooperative learning has been a big push for a long time.*

- Each staff member chose a 'buddy' they already trusted and were prepared to take risks with – thus some of the pairs were cross-stage.
- Using a curriculum focus as the vehicle for the project helped to meet the classroom teachers' needs.
- 'A progressive understanding of the action learning process facilitated more learning about teacher learning'.
- 'Starting small and personal' was important in coming to terms with the quality teaching framework.
- There was a merging of personal and professional goals – all were concerned and all chose 'student engagement'. Teachers have enjoyed 'the ownership of being able to work with their own ideas but with the social support of their buddy and other team members'.
- Excellent support was received from the academic partner both in terms of his interpersonal skills and expertise in science and technology and in action learning.
- Teacher ownership – teachers were given a choice about how to use the model and all learnt differently through the process.
- The availability of funding – the time that was set aside for 'teacher dialogue, observation, planning, reflection, resource funding and social support.'.

Future directions

The school has devoted half its professional learning allocation for 2004 to continuing the initiative through involving the rest of the staff. One possible way forward is for the staff to develop 'mini-teams'. Another suggestion has been that a team member will now 'buddy' with another staff member. It will be a challenge to ensure that recording the

process is maintained now the project is expanding. Timelines will need to be set for the whole staff. The school would also like to do more work with the parent community.

Macmillan Park High School

This case study is based on data collected from two visits to the school, one early in the project and one towards project completion. On the second occasion interviews were conducted with focus groups of students and teachers as well as with the academic partner.

School context

Macmillan Park High School is located, north of Sydney on the central coast. Currently the school serves 580 students who are largely from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Class sizes tend to be average and follow a mixed-ability pattern. However, teaching teams do exist for Stage 4 targeted classes in literacy, numeracy and independent learning.

Macmillan Park is different from other schools involved in the *Action learning school teams* projects in NSW in that, a group of Stage 5 students were recruited and actively participated as members of the project team.

Prior professional learning

SNAP and ELLA data collected at the school over the past few years has documented clear improvement in year eight results. Teachers felt this was due to innovative teaching and learning strategies implemented throughout Stage 4. However recent school certificate results have not reflected this same level of improvement. In response, the school management plan had targeted 'enhancing student learning' and 'literacy and numeracy' as priorities for 2003/2004.

Following the introduction of the NSW model of pedagogy workshops, interest at the school was stimulated and teachers were keen to trial and implement quality teaching strategies in their own classes.

Project context

According to the two head teachers who wrote the application and led the project: 'We set out to improve the quality of teaching in Stage 5 with the intention of increasing students' level of engagement and developing stronger School Certificate results. Stage 5 was chosen for this reason. It was anticipated that the quality teaching skills acquired through engagement with the Stage 5 students would "trickle-down to Stage 4 and up to Stage 6.

Head teachers from all faculties formed the project team alongside ten year nine students. With an 80% changeover in the last four years, the executive was relatively recently appointed to the school. Subject head teachers had been chosen in their capacities as educational leaders while students had been selected as a result of experience and training in peer mediation.

Action Learning

Initially some teachers in the project group considered that the project would be 'another policy that will have its day in the sun and then disappear'. But believing that 'the

teaching of literacy and numeracy is part of every Stage 5 teacher's day-to-day workload, the project team was eager to engage in professional self-evaluation, collegial evaluation, discussion and reflection of their current teaching practice.

The project team began by watching and coding lessons from the videos provided by NSW DET with discussion led by the academic partner. From the onset, the students provided incisive and relevant perspectives about the quality teaching elements and these were often different to those of the head teachers. As confidence developed in the NSW model, sample lessons of team members involved in the project were video-taped, analysed and coded according to the NSW model. Head teachers and student team members worked on this coding together. The school's academic partner also assisted in developing mechanisms in applying the model of pedagogy model into the classroom.

The next stage saw project members spending time evaluating their Stage 5 assessment tasks and redesigning these in line with NSW model of pedagogy. On the day of the evaluators' visit to Macmillan Park, we were invited to a year seven HSIE class. These students had designed their own assignment based on the outcomes from the course outline. Working on the topic 'World Heritage Sites' these students had established their own criteria and method of presentation including oral, electronic or poster. Asked how they had found the overall experience, the students remarked that they found the opportunity to use their own words really helpful and this made it easier to complete the assignment. The students also felt they understood the outcomes better and that they liked the fact that they had a clear idea of how to gain top marks.

Initially worried about how to organise a teacher-student team, both groups agreed on its success. One student stated that it 'was weird to start off. It's getting better now. It was scary at first because they are the head teachers but once you get to know them it's better'.

According to one of the team members:

> *People have come in with lots of different ideas and lots of different experiences … and possibly for the first time, we were allowed to really bring some of these to the table. And that's been valuable … we haven't had the forum to present things we've learnt in different places. As a group we really bonded … bringing together stuff we've all known and bouncing ideas off each other.*

Likewise, the involvement of students as members of the team added another significant dimension to the project. As expressed by one teacher:

> *… having students as part of the team and getting their insights has been incredibly valuable … probably the most valuable and most obvious thing is the student insight … the level of trust that has built up between all of the team members. And the students see themselves as equal partners. They don't feel they're inferior. They don't think they play a second rate role … and we [the teachers] certainly don't see them that way.*

On the day of the visit, this group of year 10 students enacted a role play to demonstrate their understanding of quality teaching. Using scientific topics such as atoms, molecules, elements and compounds, the students offered examples of 'good teaching' that incorporated 'inclusivity', 'student self-regulation', 'substantive communication', 'connectedness' and 'narrative' (in their words) 'poor teaching' where these factors were non-existent.

Leadership

Conversations with the members of the school project team including the ten students confirmed that two head teachers, one for TAS and the other for English 'ran it all from the start' with a clear direction of where the project was heading.

Role of Academic Partner

The project at Macmillan Park HS was a mutually beneficial one. The school's academic partner assisted the team members in lesson coding, provided supplementary video resources and documentary support for the team. She also assisted at early planning meetings in developing a training structure. She claimed that 'in terms of my own teaching there has been a spin-off as well'. One of the team members has been given the opportunity to work with first year education students at the university talking about quality teaching and his experiences on the project.

External Support

Funding

Funding remained a significant issue. Involvement in the project gave teachers the benefit of time – time to build up relationships between staff and students.

The Project Manager –

The project manager was involved in the second training workshop at the school where she provided her insight and expertise to team members and students in coding and analysing procedures.

Resources

There was some discussion regarding technical difficulties including email documents and timing of resource delivery, which the project leaders had found difficult.

Issues

If there was a single issue that impacted on the Macmillan *Park Action learning for school teams* project, it was one of time. All the team members felt that they had been thorough over the two terms but that the timeframe had been too short. Also finding the physical time had been very difficult since the head teachers were timetabled on different classes at different times so there was never a regular time for meetings and discussions. On a positive note, the December break gave the team members a chance to reflect. 'Time apart has enabled us to put some things into practice and then come back and discuss'.

Conclusions

Discussions between team members and students revealed an increased awareness of pedagogy issues, increased understanding and support for the NSW model of pedagogy and increased knowledge of student responses to teaching practice. This was evidenced in these comments: 'I think a really good part of the success of this project has been involving the students and their preparedness to be honest' and 'the biggest thing that has happened in the last 7-8 months has been involving the students'.

Likewise teachers spoke of the amount of collegiality within the school and an absence of 'in my area' assertions as teachers were able to move around faculties and observe each other's teaching. As a result of building relationships between staff and students, there was now a willingness to take 'on board' the implementation of the NSW model and critically evaluate Stage 5 assessment tasks. These strategies were being modelled in the classrooms of non-project teaching staff because 'they have observed this successful implementation in team members' classrooms'.

'Would you do it again?' 'Yes, without a moment's hesitation' was the response from both staff and students at Macmillan Park. Although there was still a fairly vague idea regarding the term 'action learning,' the team members spoke of evidence of individual changes and a heightened awareness of their own practice both in teaching and assessment strategies.

Plains Primary School

This case is based on one visit to the school to interview the school principal and all action learning team participants.

School Context

Located on the edge of the Riverina and western plains of NSW lies the town and primary school of Plains. The school is a small school of 200 children in a geographically isolated area. It has eight multi age stage classes. The student population is diverse, from gifted and talented to disadvantaged and disabled. Some live in town, others travel long distances to school. There is also a significant proportion of indigenous students. Teaching staff are a mix of experienced and early career teachers.

Prior Professional Learning

There was a strong history of engagement in professional development towards school-based change at Plains: as a number of interviewees remarked 'change is normal in this school'. Pedagogy had been identified as a professional learning priority since 2001. The school had participated in the National Schools Network (NSN) project on Productive Pedagogies in 2002. However, the NSN project had only included the Year 3-6 teachers who each chose to implement new pedagogies in a different KLA. As part of the NSN project the school had developed strong partnership links with two academics from Charles Sturt University at Bathurst. One of these became their academic partner for the *Action learning for school teams* project.

Project Context

There was a sense of synchronicity in the Plains experience. Science & technology had been identified in 2003 as a priority area for professional learning and the CD-ROM 'SciTechFi' supporting science & technology teaching in the primary classroom had been distributed by the district consultant. She had already begun working with the school's science coordinator to revise the science teaching program.

Thus, both science & technology and pedagogy had been identified as school priorities for professional learning. As the principal stated, 'teachers needed time and support for new content and pedagogical learning in order to develop skills in applying both to their teaching'. The infusion of the significant funds from the *Action learning for school teams* project provided that time. At Plains it was working with a specific KLA that was the vehicle to introduce the model of pedagogy. This was a deliberate strategy for, as the principal commented, what the teachers really needed and wanted was pedagogy related to science: 'if I had simply put the discussion document to teachers the shutters would have come down'.

Change had occurred incrementally in the school up to 2003. The submission to participate in the *Action learning for school teams* project, however, was seen as an opportunity for more radical whole-school change and teacher learning. All nine teachers would be involved and extra funds for release of teachers would be available. It was the intention of the action learning project that the Year 3-6 teachers build on the 2002 experience and develop rich tasks, particularly focusing on the dimension of intellectual

quality. In addition, K-2 teachers would also have the opportunity for involvement. In engaging all staff it was the intention of the principal to 'maximise the potential for professional conversations and continuity of pedagogy as students progressed through the school'.

The submission for *Action learning for school teams* funding was developed by the principal after limited consultation and discussion with executive staff responsible for the planned revision of the science & technology program. The principal made a number of strategic decisions that were central to the outcomes of the project. These included:

- two cycles of planning, development, implementation and reflection, one in Term 4, 2003 and one in Term 1, 2004
- all funds available would be allocated to maximise teacher release time
- all staff would have at least three days of release at the beginning of the project to work with the academic partner, the DET district science consultant and with each other
- the focus of the project would be on the priority needs that the teachers had identified within science & technology
- the principal would not be a participant but a coordinating support for the project and
- for the duration of the project the allocation of time for teaching science & technology would be increased at the expense of HISE, which would have increased time at a later time in the year.

In addition, the principal made it clear to teaching staff that they would all be engaged in the project. Some teachers initially found this, as well as the requirement to work with colleagues in the same stage difficult because 'I didn't like having to work with someone I was told to work with' and 'I had a difficult class and I was scared about giving them freedom and responsibility in their activities'. At the end of the project, however, these same teachers said 'I'm glad we did it' and 'I wish we could always plan and teach collaboratively, could do this with every KLA. We got so much out of generating ideas together'.

Action Learning

After their successful submission, and with the assistance of the district DET Science & Technology consultant, the teachers began to work specifically with a continuum of 'big ideas' written into the school program. Teachers were then released from class in stage teams to identify appropriate 'big ideas', outcomes and indicators that they were going to work with as a basis for their planning. Teachers were assisted in this process by their academic partner, and the district consultant.

During Term 4 teachers planned and trialed the units and observed one another teaching. Teachers took considerable risks in changing their practice. As the principal reported, 'They held on to advice given them but also made great leaps of faith, often being excited by the results'. For example most interviewees reported that they did not feel very confident about teaching science & technology. Thus some chose topics that they felt comfortable with and which they felt would be reasonably easy to develop engaging tasks

of intellectual quality. Others, relying on the input and support provided by the academic partner and consultant, consciously chose topics with which they were not comfortable.

The elements of the NSW model incorporated into their teaching units included 'high expectations', 'higher order thinking', the use of 'metalanguage' and 'substantive communication', along with 'problematic knowledge' and the potential for 'deep understanding'. As one participant commented, 'teaching with less direct instruction is extremely valuable. The more I expected of them, the more they gave me'. Other evidence of teacher learning was the visibility of science experiments taking place in the playground and science artefacts that students had built.

Teachers experience of Term 4, the culmination in a science day and the critical evaluation of their work after trialing the units led to the beginning of the planning of the second unit to explicitly address the NSW model.

Changes in staff and allocation to classes at Plains School during the Christmas break caused no difficulty in maintaining the momentum of the project. In fact, some teachers who had changed stages stated that the 'changing was an advantage: having thought and planned a teaching unit in one stage helped you know what was needed at another stage and facilitated a pedagogical continuity for students'. During Term 1 there was a much stronger explicit focus on the dimension of intellectual quality. This was so in the planning processes and the units produced, and in the learning activities and assessment tasks.

Teachers reported, as a result of their work in Term 4, they felt increased confidence at the beginning of 2004 in their understanding of both the content of the Science & Technology syllabus and its pedagogy. Thus they were all willing to choose topics and 'big ideas' that were more challenging and outside their 'comfort zone'.

In total, 16 units of work were developed, trialed and assessed by stage teams working together and then critically evaluated by the whole project team. These units were edited and published during Term 2, 2004.

There are many positive changes in teachers' knowledge and understandings reported by the principal and interview participants and also observable in the units produced. These changes in knowledge include, processes of teaching and learning science and increased confidence in their own knowledge of these; skills in using technology; the links between pedagogy and student engagement and the concept of intellectual quality and its practical application; the value of learning in teams and the value of external expertise in planning and programming. For example, interviewees commented, 'my whole expectations of children have been lifted and that has made me lift the bar in other KLAs' and 'it has totally changed the way I teach science'. There is further evidence of increased professional learning in the use of metalanguage by teachers in interviews. The principal and a number of teachers also reported that there is an increased level of the use of metalanguage by students. An increased interest in science by parents at home and at school has also been observed.

Leadership
The leadership roles played by a number of project participants were very important to the outcomes of the Plains project. These included the academic partner and the science & technology district consultant and the *Action learning for school teams* project manager. The contributions of these people are further detailed below. The most important leadership role, however, clearly acknowledged by all teachers interviewed, was that of the principal and project coordinator.

Her leadership was described as 'consultative' reported as supportive by interviewees.

External Support
The opportunity for team collaboration by teachers was provided financially by the project funds and facilitated by the DET project manager, the academic partner and the district curriculum consultant.

The role of the project manager was also very important. In the words of the participants, 'she helped us to backmap our science units and show us how the QT elements were present'. 'She affirmed what we were doing and you don't usually get this. That motivates you'; 'She made us confident we were doing it'. In commenting on her approach they said, she was 'gentle', 'supportive' and 'reassured us', and 'was not judgemental'. She also provided resources and advice.

Academic Partner
A very important factor in the Plains project was the empathetic support of the academic partner, particularly at the beginning of the project when the planning of units was taking place. Initially he assisted with ideas and in building the confidence of staff about both teaching science and quality pedagogy: 'He helped us break down the 'big ideas' and challenged us to step outside our comfort zones'; 'although we were scared, he made us feel comfortable'. Much of his success was because 'he responded to <u>our</u> needs and affirmed us'; 'the fact that he came to us! Sat with us and talked with us at lunch' and 'he knew the nitty gritty of teaching'.

As participants further commented, 'his skills and knowledge, and his respect for our knowledge and what we had to offer was vital to the success of the project', and 'his understanding of the dynamics of a small isolated primary school was central to his, and our success'. A comment in the school's final project report confirms the success of the partnership:

> *his involvement with us has been of great benefit and has demonstrated that outside expertise located in university research-based environments when employed with due respect for teachers and their knowledge and experience, reinvigorates knowledge and opens the way for recognition of the potential of school/university links in current practice rather than only in preservice education.*

Of the teachers, the academic partner says, 'the teachers in all the teams fed off each other well over the three days…their commitment to the ideal and the practicalities of professional learning was very evident'. There is no doubt that the experience at Plains School has much to teach about the construction of effective partnerships between schools and academics, and any other external support personnel.

Issues

As a result of their experience the participating teachers reported that they have identified some critical factors in achieving effective professional learning, These include:

- investment of collaborative time, particularly within stages, at the beginning of a project for teachers to program and plan: 'in the classroom doing it, changing it, analysing as you are doing it, talking to one another after you have taught it, learning as you go, evaluating it'.
- input from an academic partner should be provided by someone who is committed to the teachers and to their individual and collective professional needs.
- release from face-to-face teaching is invaluable in promoting significant professional development through thinking, writing, reflecting and examining new resources, with both colleagues and external partners.
- collaboration with colleagues especially those in the same stage is an important motivator and encourager.
- learning to teach in new ways requires additional time in the classroom in that KLA. To achieve this, something has to be removed temporarily until new practices are established and begin to become part of the teacher's and students' repertoire

Teachers made a number of suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the *Action learning for school teams* project. These included:

- the most appropriate school terms for any project. Although the fact that the project took place across two years had been explicitly planned for, participants and the principal stated that they would rather use Terms 3 and 4. This would provide greater continuity and also support the primary task of teachers in Term 1 which was suggested as the establishment of new classes.
- investing time for the academic partner not only at the beginning and end of the project, but also in the middle of the unit for further planning and refinement. While some of this did occur in the current project, it was time donated by the academic partner and not paid for.
- more realistic and authentic video resources than those that had been provided.

Conclusion

Participating in the *Action learning for school teams* project has confirmed the belief of all participants that this form of professional development is the only effective way of engaging teacher learning in a manner that ensures long-term change in teaching practice, values, beliefs and culture. In their words, 'we own it', 'it happens in our workplace, with a focus on our work', 'relevant to what we were doing with our own class every day', 'learning together, with 'support to step outside our comfort zones' through 'release time from teaching'. The principal further commented, 'a lump sum can be used to do

something significant that can be the basis of ongoing work for several years; it is an efficient use of funds'.

There are also strong moves to extend the outcomes from the action learning project. The main task is to transfer the learning about quality teaching that has taken place in science to other KLAs.

The action learning model employed in the current project will be used as a basis for further professional development in the school. As the principal says of action learning:

> *this form of professional learning gives priority to the work of teachers in classrooms and builds on their professional knowledge and expertise. It is important that changes in teachers' knowledge base extend and deepen teachers' knowledge rather than supplanting what is already there. When academic partners and consultants work outside the 'deficit' model of teacher knowledge and acknowledge all that teachers bring to the project, success in terms of long term change in teacher practice is a much more likely outcome.*

In many respects this statement is a strong rationale for the future and extended use of action learning as a major professional development strategy in schools.

Stanton High School

This case is based on two visits by evaluators to the school, interviews with all action learning team members and presentations by the school team at two conferences.

School context

Stanton High School is a comprehensive school of 800 students with 70 staff with a focus on integrating the use of technology and ICT into the curriculum. Its context combines all the features of beach and coast along with those of a declined industrial regional city. It shares increasingly land and some facilities with this school. The teachers in the action learning team at Stanton were excited about the possibility of 'raising the bar' in terms of their expectation of themselves and what was expected of their students. One of the teachers said:

> *We are trying desperately to raise the community's expectations of this school in all sorts of areas. We really want all our kids to achieve higher. Some of the kids here expect not to achieve as highly as they might in other schools.*

Prior Professional Learning

One of the important themes in the Stanton story is the history of previous successful change in the school. For over 10 years now, different groups of staff at the school have been engaged successfully in a range of initiatives to increasingly improve the quality of teaching and learning at the school.

This has been partly stimulated by a number of staff experienced in teaching at other schools who, after appointment to Stanton, believed that the students there were not achieving to their potential. This has caused pressure for staff to 'raise the bar' for their own teaching and the learning of their students. This has involved initiatives aimed at increasing staff and student expectations of academic success, enhancing teaching and learning outcomes and getting the most able students into the top 10% in state wide tests. "Raising the bar" became part of the school management plan in 2003 and initially focused around an across KLA Year 8 technology based assessment project, begun in 1998. In 2003, elements of the Productive Pedagogies were introduced, particularly those relating to the use of 'rich tasks'. The success of the technology based assessment project and previous successful change provided a context for many staff in the school to realise that it was possible for them improve their practice. This previous success experience provided a rich base on which to build *the Action learning for school teams* project.

Project Context

The initial submission was compiled by a team led by the head teacher, (Visual Arts) and the head teacher (Social Sciences) who later in the project became the deputy principal (teaching and learning). The team comprised volunteers from most of the faculties in the school.

This case study documents the experiences of the teachers who participated in the *Action learning for school teams* project. Individually the teachers saw changing their own practice as central to the changes required across the whole school. The team members

did not see this program as 'just another project'. Rather it was a further step in the journey of challenging and revitalising their own practice and the learning of their students. Many of the interviewees expressed a desire to improve their teaching by reviewing and reforming teaching practice. One team member commented:

> *I was thinking about my classroom and I was sick of doing the same thing. I was challenged by the idea that there might be better ways of doing things and that excited me. I thought the outcome would be that my students would actually want to improve. I wanted to find alternatives to the old worksheets approach.*

Action learning

All staff were invited to volunteer to participate in the project. Eight teachers from across a range of KLAs volunteered. This result met the team's aim for a 'whole school' approach to pedagogy and would be important in later widening the program to all faculties. The first task was to familiarise themselves with the NSW model. This was achieved at a one-day workshop facilitated by the academic partner from a nearby university.

After coding some of the project videos the team decided to focus on specific elements of the model. In their project, which they called 'modelling the model' they chose elements that they thought they were achieving and some they wished to further develop. All were chosen because they were directly relevant to each teacher's classroom context. For instance one of the science teachers was interested in improving the engagement of her classes because she felt in some areas that element was working well but in other areas of her teaching there was room for development.

Using these elements, they each prepared and taught a lesson in their own subject area. Each lesson was videoed by the school project coordinator. The team members then coded and discussed each other's lessons using the *Classroom practice guide*, again facilitated by their academic partner. Obviously this required a significant amount of trust and risk. The team members agreed that these experiences were some of the most powerful in their learning. Furthermore the building of the high levels of risk and trust with each other was crucial to the success and efficacy of the project. One of the team members relates her experience of this process:

> *What I liked about the way we worked was the collaboration. At first I thought "how ghastly" everybody watching me teach, but sitting around together and working with each other I realised we were there just to give support. We inspired each other to be passionate because we got excited together. To me it was easy to get involved because we weren't doing on our own. I mean at no time did I feel that we were being judged or marked. We laughed at ourselves, I mean we were hardest on ourselves when we were reviewing our own lessons.*

As part of their project, team members have held interviews with focus groups of students. In the interviews students were asked to discuss what they thought makes quality teaching

During Term 4, 2003, the team had a number of opportunities to report through faculty and staff meetings to the whole school staff about the project and its achievements. This communication, vital in any successful change, allowed for the extension of the team's learning to a wider group of staff. This was crucial to the next phase of the program developing a whole school approach.

At the beginning of Term 1, 2004, each of the project team members made presentations to their faculty colleagues and invited one of their colleagues to join them in an expanded project team. This staged, gradually increasing impact of project activities and outcomes is a familiar model in school-based change: gradually working towards the acceptance of the new ideas by a critical mass of school staff. One staff member mentioned the effect the action learning project had on the culture of the staffroom:

> *I noticed that the program led to discussions in the staffroom. So there will be discussions about meta-language or other elements of the model. It has become part of our day to day conversations.*

The work of this augmented team, and the wider impact of the NSW model on more staff were supported by the development of a DVD. The DVD has sections that outline the elements of the NSW model, provide exemplars of these taken from the original project team members' videos and include a full lesson that can be coded. In addition, there is material drawn from interviews with students and the original project team members about their learning and their experiences. The DVD format has been chosen for its flexibility of use and because technology is an important aspect of the culture of the school. The DVD is designed as a tool for individual and faculty reflection, discussion, professional learning and the basis for investigating teaching practice.

Academic partner

The role of the academic partner was to 'assist in the understanding of the model, help the team to understand and use the coding and assist with further planning and implementation of teacher professional development arising from the project'.

The academic partner was unanimously recognised as a key factor in the success of the project. One of the teacher's commented on the ability of the academic partner to provide the outside eye which was helpful in guiding and supporting the learning in the staff involved. Another team member remarked:

> *The academic partner assisted by working with us on the elements and then helping us understands the coding process. He has met with the team a couple of times and helped us as it developed and grew and shifted. It was his idea to establish an interest group that was so important in the success of the project.*

External Support

The project manager

The project manager provided important support form the 'head office' keeping them in touch with the progress of the project throughout the state.

Conclusion

Funding was the most important factor that enabled the opportunity for release from class teaching and the opportunity for collaborative meeting and learning.

There is much evidence of the level of engagement and professional learning by the Stanton team. The most important factor for engagement in professional learning has been the collaborative relationships that have been constructed within the group and the willingness of the team to critically examine their own practice with a supportive colleague. One of the teachers enthused about the changes she saw in her students through the program commenting:

> *I think action learning is effective because it helps you remodel and reassess what you do and then gives you ways to change your practice. For me it's like a freshener. If we can spread engagement and enthusiasm to our colleagues in other faculties and then eventually onto the whole school kids will think: "I am going to Stanton High School where I will be challenged and I will achieve."*

These changes have been built on relationships characterised by increasing levels of risk and trust. This has meant that members of the team have reconceptualized their own teaching and changed their everyday practice to improve the learning experience for their students.

The resounding message from Stanton is the power of a focussed, collaborative and reflective team in professional development. This team, who were volunteers and had been actively involved in changing and renewing their practice throughout their careers, reported important changes in their own classrooms. Changes identified include increased levels of student engagement and self regulation with resultant increased potential for deep understanding through substantive communication. Their next challenge is to spread the enthusiasm and excitement of team members to their colleagues and effect changes in the whole school culture. They have a strong chance of achieving that goal if they are able to transfer the trust, support and acceptance of risk that they have established in their action learning team.

Valley View High School

Information used in this case is based on two visits to the school, interviews with the school principal, school project coordinator and three of the other four members of the project team.

School Context

Valley View High School is a small 7-12 comprehensive secondary school. The school has 390 students including a significant proportion of Indigenous students as well as students with a range of educational disadvantages.

Prior Professional Learning

There is a strong history at Valley View of school change and reform. The large majority of teachers reportedly accept that they live in a world of change that is a natural part of school life. More important they are committed to improving their teaching and the learning outcomes of their students.

The school has participated in a number of school change programs. These have been supported by a principal who is committed to the idea that it is the teachers in classrooms that have to be responsible for changes, albeit supported by the executive of the school. In his opinion, if such change is going to be achieved then it is the teachers who must own and control the change, its processes and speed. As he said, 'the whole process of education is about empowerment, and real learning doesn't take place unless the people doing the learning are empowered'. The commitment of the leadership to teacher professional learning was illustrated by their willingness to provide funds from the school budget to support a project investigating quality teaching even before the school was successful in its action learning project submission.

Project Context

In 2001, the school requested a school review by officers from the NSW DET. While extremely positive, the review resulted in 13 recommendations for improvement. School committees were established to work on each of these. One of the recommendations concerned improving the quality of teaching and learning across the school. Six teacher volunteers formed a steering committee to consider strategies to realise this recommendation. Five of these teachers subsequently became the members of the *Action learning for school teams* project. They came from five KLAs- English, science, HSIE, TAS and PDHPE.

The members of the steering group during 2002 and early 2003 struggled in their reading and discussions to identify a framework that might be useful to plan improvements to the quality of their teaching. A suggestion of an external 'expert' partly arose because of a degree of conflict between the learning styles of the committee members and raises an interesting issue for action learning in schools. While those who were verbal and reflective learners were happy to continue reading and discussion, the active experimenters wanted action. The level of frustration was increased because of a lack of time and opportunity to support their professional discussions.

The principal obtained an early draft of the NSW discussion paper and immediately gave it to the members of the school quality teaching committee. There was a wonderful synchronicity between the rising frustration in the committee to find direction and the arrival of the discussion paper in the school: as one member expressed, 'it (the discussion paper) arrived just in time'. All staff, supported, but not pressured by the principal, were encouraged to read and begin to discuss the NSW model of pedagogy. The quality teaching steering committee saw in the document the framework they had been searching for to begin to investigate their own teaching. The main problems, however, continued to be the lack of time to meet and plan.

Action Learning

Members of the original committee, joined by the newly appointed mathematics head teacher, formed the action learning team. In broad terms, the project was to focus initially on the team developing a personal understanding of the NSW model of pedagogy through team meetings: 'gaining a deep knowledge and deep understanding of the elements'. The second phase was the development of units/programs in individual team members' own KLAs based on selected elements of the NSW model of pedagogy. These would form the basis of beginning to engage staff in their own faculties with the model. While team members had both an individual goal (eg.'I wanted to investigate student centred learning and see if it was quality teaching') and a goal related to faculty colleagues, it was the personal goal that assumed greater importance, especially in the early part of the project: as one team member said, 'to improve your **own** practice by working together.

One of the important steps in the action learning process was the gathering of baseline data on teachers' own teaching and from those students in the particular class that was to form the focus of their individual project. These comprised:

- developing a proforma to record teachers' understanding of each element along with an indication of how frequently they believed they employed that element in their teaching;
- choosing one lesson or program and reflectively analysing it to identify to what extent a selected dimension of the NSW model was evident**;**
- undertaking a survey of student perceptions of what makes quality teaching and effective teachers; and,
- observing each other's lessons, some of which had been videoed by students, to see to what extent particular elements of quality teaching were present.

In these ways, team members completed a situational analysis of their own teaching and from this were able to establish their own action learning goals.

With this diagnostic and baseline data the team members then worked with their academic partner to thoroughly familiarise themselves with the NSW model of pedagogy, its dimensions and elements, and their application to the school. This work included coding and critical discussion of some of the video project resources.

One of the most interesting activities in this phase was a critical discussion between team members after being introduced to the model to identify what they thought were the key

changes in applying the NSW model as compared to the elements of quality teaching that they had identified themselves in their prior discussions.

Thus the team members' action learning process demonstrated not simply an acceptance of the abstract ideas in the NSW model of pedagogy but a deep knowledge and understanding that provided the basis for critical analysis of those ideas and their application at Valley View.

Videoing lessons and then watching and critically analysing the videos together were unanimously recognised as one of the most powerful learning experiences. As one participant reflected,

> *having someone else ask questions about why you did or didn't do something was very important because that has not happened for a long time..(it) doesn't usually happen in schools'….'we have developed a common language about teaching in the team… and that language isn't common across the staff yet… that highlights our learning.*

And as another team member commented, 'it wasn't the coding that was so important but the professional discussion that happened'.

2003 for the action learning team was devoted entirely to focused and concentrated professional learning. The cycles of action learning and the stages of planning and establishing learning goals, acting, including gathering data and then reflecting and evaluating before replanning, redoing etc were well evidenced. Understandings generated by their learning about the NSW model have been reportedly internalised in both thinking and the reflective deconstruction of practice and some of this was evident in interviews. Thus, one team member who worked on 'high expectations' said 'I used to be happy as long as the kids did their work now I am thinking in every lesson a lot more about what the students can achieve'. Another member commented,

> *the most important thing is that I have developed a framework that makes sense. I know where quality teaching fits and it has become internalised. Now I'm thinking 'is what I am doing working with that student, is it successful learning and what is the evidence for that…I'm always looking for evidence.*

A different team member stated, 'I am thinking much more about the HOW rather than what'.

While continuing their own learning during Term 1, 2004 through the application of the model to programming in individual subject areas and comparison with the baseline data, the team also began the introduction of the model and its application to the rest of the school staff. There was a possible tension here between the across KLA group learning and collaboration of 2003 and translating their learning into their own KLAs. It was intended that there would be some observation and coding of each other's lessons, but at the same time, some of the discussions of team members would focus on the most appropriate ways to engage the rest of the staff in quality teaching.

Leadership

Leadership, both of the project itself and at the wider school level were significant in the Valley View project. There is no doubt that the principal was not only committed to teacher learning, professional development of his staff and school change, but also had a well informed and insightful understanding of adult and teacher learning and professional development. He saw his role as one of 'support and facilitation'. This was clearly communicated to the members of the action learning team. In their words,

> *He is very supportive, backs us, says we're the leaders and doesn't put constraints on us…has always used what we are doing at staff development days but hasn't overemphasised us: the principal gave us permission and encouraged us to go off and do it in our own way. While he supported us, he didn't interfere but gave us the challenge and responsibility to do it.*

The project coordinator was described by team members as someone 'inspiring', 'who keeps up with the latest ideas (in Education), 'who knows each of us as people and knows when to push and when to pull back', 'a great organiser' and a good communicator'. Thus her leadership in the success of the action learning project was 'very important'.

External Support

Important factors in realising the project outcomes at Valley View were the support received from the *Action learning for school teams* project manager.

Academic Partner

All participants agreed that an important factor in the success of the *Action learning for school teams* project was the **initial** relationship with the academic partner. The academic partner had a 'good knowledge of the NSW model of pedagogy and who could listen to the aspirations of the school team and then use her knowledge and experience to suggest directions and focus for our project'.

The academic partner did not have a continuing role in 2004. There is also a strong feeling that the academic partner is now so far behind what the team has been doing that it will not be easy to re-engage her in their processes. This raises interesting questions about the role and responsibilities of the academic partner, withdrawal by the partner and building capacity in project schools. Questions of responsibility in communication and completing the duties as specified and agreed to in the memorandum of understanding by the academic partner are also pertinent.

Issues

The most important factors supporting their action learning identified by teachers at Valley View were:

- funding by the Australian government;
- support from the project officer and NSW Quality Teaching manager;
- collegiality and the level of trust generated within the team to take risks
- learning about other subjects, , the manner in which teaching is constructed within them and the similarities and differences that exist

- the opportunity to work with their academic partner; and
- leadership both in the project and from the principal.

Thus one of the important outcomes, maybe unintentional, was the learning about other subjects. Arguably, such sharing is very important in an outcomes-based curriculum and assessment context.

There was also some significant learning about professional learning and the critical factors that make it effective in schools. These included:

- the notion of seeking from outside experts was replaced with the conviction that much learning could occur through focused investigation of teachers' own classroom practice;
- learning together, particularly sharing ideas across KLAs, is not only invigorating but rich in the understandings it can produce about teaching, learning and classroom practice:
- the more team members understand about the NSW model and quality teaching, the more questions there are to investigate and discuss. As one team member said, 'action learning is an evolving, growing thing. You can find out what isn't working and change it and then move on'.
- while the funding provided the opportunity for increased teacher release, this was not unproblematic. Participants spent quite a deal of their own time. Additionally, casual teachers were not easily available for Valley View and even if they were, they were not necessarily competent in the subject areas needed.

All participants in the *Action learning for school teams* project at Valley View High indicated that they would participate in action learning again.

Participants had very few suggestions as to how future action learning projects could be improved. In the words of the project coordinator:

> *I don't think I would change anything major… I think the good thing about this action learning project is that it was about continual learning rather than having to produce a product. While the timing of the two terms has been very pressurised it has made us get on and do things… I think the short time frame … actually assisted us. Pressure with support really enabled change.*

Another team member commented, 'I liked the short time frame because it doesn't drag on, can see it through to the finish'.

The two suggested changes related to:

- arrangements with the academic partner. On reflection, participants suggested that if they were to engage an academic partner again they would spend much more time clarifying the specific role, responsibilities and time commitments of this person.
- detailed and regular communication with the rest of the staff concerning the action learning project and its progress. As one participant stated, 'they (rest of staff) see us

as having money and ask when are they going to see some of it. … they don't see how much hard work and learning we are doing'.

The issue of a small team engaged in a special project being seen by others as separate and elite is a perennial challenge in organisational change. The opportunity to confront this challenge is part of the future possible directions of the Valley View project.

Conclusion

Based on the complexity and struggle of their own learning the Valley View team do not underestimate the challenge to engage the rest of their colleagues. Some of these are very keen to engage in similar learning processes. Other colleagues 'see it as more work'. As the principal remarked, 'we have to encourage the participation of some reluctant staff members'. One of the key concerns is where will the time and resources come from to extend the professional learning about quality teaching to the whole school.

Wartarra School for Specific Purposes

Context
Wartarra Public School is a small special school located in inner western Sydney. The school has a cohesive and collegial staff who 'support each other with the challenges of teaching students with severe intellectual disabilities'. Currently the school has 28 students in five age groupings.

The *Action learning for school teams* project at the school focused on improving teaching practice, and as a result, student learning outcomes through reflection and adoption of a quality and consistent pedagogy. The principal, who had written the initial proposal, believed that engagement with quality teaching through the action learning project had allowed teachers both new and experienced, to revisit their teaching. The project also made provision for meaningful interaction with other special schools in the area.

Professional learning background
Literacy/communication and information communication technology was the focus for the action learning project and aligned with the school management plan in terms of the school's current and anticipated future, philosophy and action areas. In fact, literacy/communication is central to all teaching and learning at this special primary school.

The school has a history of innovative teaching practice including work on different learning strategies and multiple intelligences before such approaches became accepted in mainstream classrooms. According to the Assistant Principal, the Quality teaching in NSW public schools discussion paper 'came along at just the right time' (Interview March, 2004). The teachers needed a mechanism to examine not just what they were doing within the classroom but what changes, if any, needed to take place.

Action learning
Given the nature of the school and its students, Wartarra staff were very comfortable with a team approach to teaching and learning.

> *We always work as a team in our classroom situations so working as a team across the school was no big deal. I think it's the only way to go and being in a small school, you are even more of a team … there's more scope – it makes it easier.*

Initially the project was aimed at evaluating what was currently happening in terms of teaching practice – individually and collectively and to then determine what opportunities the NSW model of pedagogy would offer teachers of students with very high intellectual and physical support needs. According to the principal: 'we wanted the opportunity for personal reflection, and then to evaluate the current practices in the school, determining what things we needed to change, what we needed to hold onto and what directions we should be following for the future'.

The Action learning for school teams project at Wartarra required a lot of initial input. The staff met as a team for afternoon workshops and were involved in analytical discussions of each of the dimensions of the NSW model of pedagogy and its dimensions. This analysis also involved the interpretation of the elements into indicators that could be expected of the student cohort at the school. One teacher who initially trained as a secondary Visual Arts specialist claimed that working on the project 'gave us a forum to sit down as a team, as a group of teachers and discuss things that were common to all of us … a way of focussing the group's attention'. The same teacher although relatively new to the field of special education added:

> *people were initially overwhelmed and were maybe a bit sceptical about the project… when there were opportunities for questioning, it was all 'how do we relate this to children with severe intellectual disabilities?' … It was wise of [the principal] to structure the workshops the way she did because immediately we had to make the framework for ourselves.*

As part of their personal reflection on their current teaching practices, the teachers were asked to keep a 'learning journal.' Conversations with the staff, however, revealed that the majority of the teachers commenced but did not continue with this practice. It would seem that the opportunity to sit down and discuss teaching practice and student learning with a 'critical friend' was found to be more valuable to their professional learning and summative notes of these sessions were more useful.

The next phase of the project saw individual teachers videoed by a colleague. Each teacher elected her choice of lesson or learning experience and whether it would be a class lesson or individual lesson with a child. The brief did require that the nominated lesson should include literacy and ITC. Currently, all teachers at the school have been videoed and have been given the opportunity to write a personal reflection review of the video of their lesson.

Asked how they felt about this process, all teachers spoke positively about the experience. According to the principal:

> *initially a few people were anxious and … great preparations were made for the lesson that they were going to have videoed … but after each one was finished, everyone said 'well, that wasn't too bad!' … I said to them that the video is being done to assist you as a teacher … they were quite thrilled with the results and now they all want to do it again. It's been a great teaching tool .*

Many teachers also spoke of the dual benefit of videoing lessons with special needs students since the children gained a great deal from watching themselves and their peers.

The staff at Wartarra participated in an inter-collegial workshop with teams from three other SSP involved in the *Action learning for school teams* project. This was seen as an opportunity to share knowledge, experiences and teaching implications in reference to the NSW model. Wartarra hosted the meeting and while the purpose was the dissemination

of information, most teachers found that it didn't achieve what they had expected given that schools were at different stages in their Action learning for school teams projects.

The next inter-school meeting was planned for after-school and involved mixed groups rather than progress reports from each school. It was anticipated that this arrangement would allow teachers working in similar contexts to share their experiences with peers.

Teachers commented on changes in student behaviour i.e. functioning, in the classroom. For example: 'it surprised me how good it's been. I don't know whether its primarily the opportunity to sit down with your peers and discuss learning strategies or … discuss something that would have been seen as abstract like intellectual quality with profoundly disabled kids'.

Another teacher discussed the impact thinking about substantive communication with special needs students and how the quality teaching model had helped her focus on this with her students rather than engage in more fleeting interaction.

Leadership
Conversations with the staff revealed that the principal prepared the project submission with little explicit consultation due to the short timeframe but a great deal of general staff agreement regarding their involvement. One teacher at the school stated: ' the principal and the assistant principals [have been] excellent mentors and have organised and led … but we have all had lots of input'.

The Role of the Academic Partner
Staff felt that the academic partner's input had been limited by the particular challenge of applying the quality teaching model to special needs students. At the time of interview they were looking forward to his comments on the videotaped lessons.

Funding
Clearly one of the most significant aspects of the project at Wartarra has been the opportunity to pay for relief time.

Conclusion
Overwhelmingly, all members of the *Action learning for school teams* project acknowledged its benefit in extending their professional learning about quality teaching. One teacher who initially trained as a secondary music teacher stated: 'It's a bit hard to actually pinpoint changes but in myself, I'm more aware … It's awareness. For me, its been excellent'. Term 4, 2003 and Term 1, 2004 saw the staff at Wartarra gain a deeper understanding of the NSW model of pedagogy and relate it to their teaching of profoundly disabled students. The model allowed the principal and teachers to set their own parameters although many still believe that more thought needs to be given to broadening the model to encompass special education and the learning needs of its students.

Section 5- Academic Partners

1. The Context and the Evaluation Process

1.1 The academic partners
Forty three academic partners were involved in the *Action learning for school teams* project. Ten universities were represented across NSW.

1.2 The Evaluation Process
Academic partners were invited to participate in an evaluation. A range of options for participating and providing feedback was offered. These were as follows:

0. Attend discussion forum at University of Western Sydney
1. Attend discussion forum at Sydney University
2. Participate in a telephone interview
3. Participate in a face-to-face interview
4. Participate in email communication
5. Complete a brief survey via email
6. Other suggestions

1.3 Collecting Data
In the ensuing weeks, nine academic partners responded in writing to a substantial series of questions. Telephone interviews were conducted with a further eight academic partners, and three academic partners were interviewed face-to-face. A total of twenty academic partners were involved in the evaluation. Academic partners from all participating universities were involved in the evaluation:

- Charles Sturt University
- Macquarie University
- Southern Cross University
- University of New England
- University of Newcastle
- University of Western Sydney
- University of Wollongong
- University of Sydney
- University of Technology

1.4 Focus Questions for academic partner feedback
The questions were as follows:

0. What do you understand your role in the project has been?

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

2. Were the school's expectations of you and your role, and your expectations of the school, made explicit early on in the project?

3. How effective was the briefing at the NSW DET Training Day?

4. To what extent have you been able to model action learning at the school you have worked with?

5. Do you consider your role as an academic partner was valued by the school(s)?

6. Do you consider that the payment you received was appropriate?

7. How did your role as academic partner impact upon your work at university? eg. Did your university take part of your money; was the work recognised in your workload; were there other forms of explicit recognition of your role as academic partner)

8. If you were based a long distance from the school you were working with, did this have an impact on the project?

9. In your view, is action learning an effective Professional Development model for teachers and schools? Why or why not?

10. Do you have other comments to make or issues to raise about any aspect of this project and/or your involvement in it?

The evaluation team considered it important to elicit from the academic partners their views not only about their role and its significance, or otherwise, to the school's project, but also their sense of the wider implications of this model for future teacher professional development and productive school-university partnerships.

2. Models of Academic or External Partners in School and Teacher Development

The research literature provides extensive insights into a number of models for teacher professional development that include the participation of a person 'external' to the day-to-day activities and enterprise of the school, but who is considered capable of understanding and responding to the needs of the teachers within that school. Indeed, a number of well-documented school-improvement models from the United Kingdom, for example, have included an external 'adviser' whose primary role has been one of *facilitation* rather than *provision* of teacher professional development. Fundamental to the concept of action learning is the principle of teacher-led professional development, supported and validated by both a collegial support structure within the school, and also a partner from another educational context (often from the university sector or the educational bureaucracy) who can adapt and respond to the articulated needs of the teachers.

The research literature indicates that the role of the 'external' advisor, academic partner or critical friend in a teacher-led professional development project is not unproblematic. Depending on the nature and extent of the partner's prior contact with and knowledge of

the school and/or individual teachers, the process of 'finding a place' and explicitly sharing expectations of the roles of all participants within the context of the project is a crucial first step towards a successful outcome. There are documented examples of the tendency for some schools and teachers to view the academic partner as the 'expert' who promises the Golden Fleece – the bearer of the solution to whatever issues or concerns the teachers are addressing. Such expectations cut against the grain of professional development models such as action learning, that are driven by the *personal focus* and need of individual teachers, working within a collegially supportive and structured environment for learning.

3. Academic Partners' Responses

3.1 Question 1: What do you understand your role in the project has been?

Academic partners were generally able to articulate the nature of their role in the project. Examples of responses included:

- Team facilitator
- Assist staff in devising a program of work
- Bringing a fresh perspective on teachers' practice
- Validating teachers' practice
- A sounding board for discussions
- Responding to particular issues and giving feedback
- Listening and responding to teachers' needs
- A critical friend whose role evolved over time
- A resource person to support schools and teachers with resources and academic expertise
- To advise and guide teachers
- To expose teachers to new ideas (through journal articles, etc)
- Help teachers convince other teachers in the school that the NSW model of pedagogy is worthwhile
- A general assistant at workshops and a critical friend at committee meetings
- Provide input about the NSW model
- Clarify aspects of the NSW model
- Stimulate teacher discussion and extend teacher thinking
- Design professional learning experiences
- Facilitate planning workshops
- Presenting and sharing research and theory
- Support the team leaders in unpacking the NSW model's dimensions and elements
- Introducing the dimensions of coding.

Interestingly, many academic partners assumed that they had to endorse the principles contained within the NSW model, assisting teachers in exploring the elements and dimensions and in coding procedures. Implicitly, a majority of academic partners saw themselves as the facilitator and the resource person, working to enable and support teachers in their professional learning and to assist them in the planning and analysis of classroom experiences.

Only one academic partner identified what is perhaps a critical point about the role of the academic partner in the action learning model: the academic partner's role was not so much to assist in an uncritical acceptance and implementation of the *content* of the NSW discussion paper, but to emphasise and make explicit the *process* of professional learning and its dynamics. In the view of this particular academic partner, who had significant experience in action learning, there was too much emphasis on the *content* (of which teachers had no *a priori* ownership) and not enough emphasis on the driver of action learning – the individual teacher's professional and personal ownership of the area of focus. That teachers were required to utilise the *coding sheet* was, in the words of one academic partner, 'contradictory and at odds with the underpinning principle of action learning' – that is, teacher choice is fundamental.

Three academic partners described their role as 'difficult' and 'problematic'. Navigating through often hostile terrain and intricate webs of school or staff politics became a tangible impediment to the progress of the 'partnership' between the academic partner and the project team. In each of the three cases in which the partnership teetered, the academic partner had not had previous contact with the school prior to the action learning project. In two cases, the academic partner was based a significant distance from the school.

3.2 Question 2: What do you understand by the term "action learning"*?*

While many academic partners articulated some understanding of aspects of action learning, others did not understand the process or principles and at times there was confusion of the term action learning with the term action research. Overall, however, the responses indicate that a majority of those participating in the evaluation had at least some understanding of the term and recognised that their understanding evolved and developed during the project itself.

Included below is a sample of responses that ranges across a broad spectrum. The responses here are representative of the continuum of understanding and attitudes articulated by the academic partners.

> *Action learning is about empowering teachers with research tools to investigate their own practice.*
>
> *Learning through critical reflection on specific aspects of personal practice.*
>
> *I guess I tend to pretty much ignore this kind of thinking. I don't think groups of people sitting around discussing, trialing are going to come up with anything significant unless they start from a research base – and this means having someone around who knows the research base. Teachers don't read research, can't apply it … what bothers me is that research tells us a lot about effective education for students and I find it hard to believe that schools should ignore this.*
>
> *A key feature of this process (action learning) has been the time devoted to planning and later reflecting on the action.*

The reflective cycle that informs their professional learning.

Understanding the processes of one's own learning is the most important thing.

Teacher choice is fundamental. It is about individual teachers choosing a focus for their own learning and working in a socially supportive structure. The collegiality has to be there to begin with or the action learning will not work. action learning means teachers stay in their comfort zone. It doesn't suit all contexts. It can be a stepping-stone to teacher research.

Teachers must own it. These teachers didn't.

It is important to note that the majority of academic partners regarded action learning as a positive addition to a teacher's repertoire of strategies for professional development.

3.3 Question 3: Were the school's expectations of you and your role, and your expectations of the school, made explicit early on in the project?

According to the majority of academic partners in the evaluation, the school's expectations about roles were not made explicit early on, or at any stage during the project. The most common response here was that the expectations were not spelt out, but became evident and evolved over time. There were some notable exceptions, where the academic partner was involved in the initial planning of the project, and this seemed to provide a key opportunity to define and clarify roles. According to one academic partner, 'this made the project particularly successful'. This academic partner was working with two schools, and with the other school project, to which she was 'allocated'… 'the expectations were less clear and had to be clarified'.

For another academic partner: 'I don't think the schools had clear expectations – there was some expectation that I would be fully conversant with the model – dimensions and elements etc and know how they would be applied – but it quickly became obvious that we needed to work that through together… So the expectations were never made explicit'.

The response from an academic partner who came into the project after it had been funded had this to say: 'I don't think either I or the school team had any idea of what I could contribute. One reason for this was that I had no experience of working with schools in the way that was required in this project…It was not until the project was nearly complete that it became clearer to me what I might have done … but by that time it proved impossible to implement – and did not seem too popular anyway'.

In one case, the lack of clear expectations and a confusion over the role of the academic partner lead to conflict and tension throughout the project. The project team leader, in this case, was, according to the academic partner, 'a dominant, overbearing' person 'with too much power over the staff'. The academic partner perceived that the team leader took on

the academic partner role, leaving little space for the academic partner to contribute. When the academic partner tried to make suggestions for workshops or questioned methodology, the academic partner was 'locked out' and the team leader 'responded on behalf of the team, never letting them voice their own responses'.

An academic partner who had not been involved in the initial planning of the project similarly commented that 'the teachers were initially very unsure of what I had to offer because I had no part in the development of their proposal'.

What emerged as a critical factor in the successful partnership between school teams and the academic partner was the extent to which the academic partner had either an established relationship with one or more of the team members and knew the context of the school, and/or worked on the project in the initial planning phases.

3.4 Question 4: How effective was the briefing with the NSW DET*?*

Responses to this question ranged from 'very effective and useful' to 'appaling' and 'disgraceful'.

Overall, the academic partners found the briefing of value, but more so in its emphasis on the NSW discussion paper than on the principles and model of action learning. Consistent among the views was the desire for more information, case studies and readings about action learning itself, even though the action learning Handbook was available to all academic partners on the *Action learning for school teams* website.

3.5 Question 5: To what extent have you been able to model action learning at the school you have worked with?

Most of the academic partners in the evaluation did not model action learning. Academic partners noted time as a factor in being able to model action learning, seeing it as a time-intensive process that requires more extensive work with the school than the time allowed. Despite this, the academic partners did not see modelling of action learning as a critical factor since many of the successful projects demonstrated the effectiveness of sharing practice through observing colleagues' teaching, discussing and planning actions and then reflecting on the outcomes of these. A couple of academic partners said that they were not aware they had to model action learning.

3.6 Question 6: Do you consider your role as an academic partner *was valued by the school?*

The majority of academic partners responded in the affirmative to this question. 'To my knowledge, I believe so. I was always greeted warmly and in a busy school teachers always came to a planning session'. Most academic partners were able to build strong rapport with the team and were welcomed and given positive feedback on their contributions. There were a couple of exceptions to this, but the academic partner in these cases believed that individual teachers did value the contribution, even though there was no explicit, formal feedback from the project team leaders.

3.7 Question 7: Do you consider that the payment you received was appropriate?

There was an almost universal view that the payment was appropriate, although many academic partners noted that they did not undertake the project for the payment *per se*. In fact, many commented that they gave far more time to the project than what appeared on paper. Most saw the opportunity to work with a school and teachers as an affirming and positive professional development experience for themselves, and welcomed the opportunity to continue to be involved in partnerships.

3.8 Question 8: How did your role as **academic partner** *impact upon your work at university? (eg. Did your university take part of the money; was the work recognised in your workload; were there other forms of explicit recognition of your role as* **academic partner***)*

A majority of academic partners in this evaluation were paid via a university consultancy or research account, and therefore the university siphoned off anything from ten to thirty percent of the total amount. Other academic partners entered into an arrangement with their head of department or Dean to be paid as a private consultant, in which case the university did not take any of the funds.

Some academic partners noted there were problems with the contract between the school and the university. Only one academic partner providing information reported that their work was formally recognised by the university and was positively supported through emails to all staff. A number of academic partners had to juggle teaching and administration commitments at university and felt that this impacted on their workload. No academic partners had any recognition of the project as part of their formal workload.

As one academic partner noted, 'when you work with a school community by necessity it involves many hours of negotiation and communication if this kind of project is to be successful. I have tried to maximise this learning opportunity for myself and have remained involved with the team at conference level'.

Clearly, there continues to be structural and philosophical impediments and even disincentives in establishing partnerships with schools whereby academics' involvement is visibly valued and recognised as part of their core work: 'My involvement in the project was ignored by the university. It was not considered part of my workload and was not recognised in any way'.

3.9 Question 9: If you were based a long distance from the school you were working with, did this have an impact on the project?

Several academic partners involved in this evaluation were a significant distance from the school they were working with – ie at least 5-6 hours driving to reach the school. They agreed that the time spent travelling was counter-productive and limited the amount of input they could have to the project. Although it did not have any direct negative impact on the project, it did prevent the academic partner from working in a consistent and continuous way in the context of the school itself.

3.10 Question 10: In your view, is **action learning** *an effective professional development model of teachers and schools? Why/Why not?*

The majority of academic partners believed that the action learning model is an appropriate one for teachers and schools although there were some significant caveats and concerns. A selection of comments provides some insights into the range of issues this question raised.

> *Although I have not seen any tangible outcomes, I know that it gave teachers TIME to reflect and discuss their practice. It also gave them a common language to talk about their practice. I also believe that the role of the academic partner is critical in supporting the teachers in finding a focus, in providing resources such as teaching and learning materials and research, and facilitating workshops.*
>
> *Yes, action learning is a good place to start, but it is limited. It should lead into research. It works best when there are small groups of teachers, and even better when there are 'buddies' – two teachers working together within a group. In my experience, it was the pairs who met, discussed and provided support. The team as a whole only met a couple of times overall. action learning can be an effective model if it is driven by personal relevance. Forcing teachers to using a coding sheet or forcing some kind of content on them is simply at odds with the model. I felt the action learning process needed to be foregrounded and the content of the QT needed to take a back seat. It's the process of learning that is important.*
>
> *The teachers involved have emphatically expressed their appreciation of the model. I have found it very useful, and professionally enriching for me, to have the level of involvement over a period of time. However, it is clear that the success of the model has been largely attributable to the level of funding that has enabled time to be 'bought' for teachers to plan and reflect. Whether this can be maintained without external funding is the challenge for schools and the Department alike.*

It is significant to note here that the feedback about the effectiveness of the model related to the effectiveness of the *process* of action learning and the ways in which teachers and schools engaged with it, rather than the content of the NSW model of pedagogy.

3.11 Question 11: Do you have other comments to make or issues to raise about any aspect of this project and/or your involvement in it?

A number issues were raised by academic partners in their concluding comments. These included:

- the academic partner may need to work with the school before the submission is finalised;
- the academic partner needs to be geographically close to the school and have a good contextual understanding of the school community, history and environment;
- there is a place for initial teacher education programs in such a model, following the recommendations of the Ramsey and previous reviews of teacher education;
- universities need to recognise partnerships with schools as an integral part of academics' work, and not merely as an add-on that they must undertake in their own time;
- the driving force needs to be the school and the teachers and this needs to lead on to a groundswell of thinking about the importance of teacher research;
- the issue of academic workload is important. How do we manage the load when we have requests from many schools to provide PD and support?
- action learning is a good model as long as it is a stepping-stone for further PD and eventually teacher research; and
- Department briefings need to be more focussed on the action learning model and it would be useful to provide some case studies of action learning for academics and teachers.

4. Conclusions

From the extensive feedback from more than half of the academic partners involved in this initiative, some generalisable conclusions can be drawn that may be of value in the design and implementation of future professional development projects. These can be summarised as follows:

- there is a need to ensure academic partners have a clear and thorough understanding of the model of action learning;
- The projects that worked particularly well for the academic partner were those that involved the academic partner in the very early stages of planning or implementation, and where the academic partner had some prior relationship with the school, its teachers and/or its community;
- geographical distance from the school was a serious issue in that it restricted the amount of time an academic partner could spend with teachers, in the school.
- many academic partners saw the need for a clarification of roles from the outset.
- a number of academic partners found the focus on the NSW discussion paper was foregrounded to the detriment of the *process* of action learning itself.
- academic partners took on many roles within schools and were happy to "fit in" with whatever the teachers required them to do. The range of roles and tasks undertaken reflects the consistent view that the academic partner was not the 'expert' with the magic solutions, but rather, a facilitator of the PD process, a resource person, and an informed colleague who could offer insights and support learning from a fresh perspective.
- valuing the importance of academic partners' work with schools and teachers, through tangible and visible policies and practice (on the part of the university), was a strong motif throughout the discussions.

- many academic partners commented on the need to clarify the system of payment and workload within the university context, particularly since some universities had legal difficulties with the contract and Memorandum of Understanding.
- academic partners almost unanimously felt valued by the teachers with whom they worked and would welcome the opportunity to continue to build and develop the professional relationships.

The generosity and honesty of the academic partners is acknowledged. They took the time, often during extremely busy periods of their working day, to provide extensive, thoughtful and informative feedback about their role in and perspectives on the *Action learning for school teams* project.

Section 6 - Findings

There was a clear indication in submissions, reports and interviews of evidence of positive engagement in previous school-based change. Examples identified included the *Disadvantaged schools program*, *Priority action schools project* and *Productive pedagogies*. Reported engagement in previous processes of action learning, however, was minimal. Although it is impossible to assert that positive experience of school change was a causative factor in the success of action learning projects, it is true that a number of interviewees identified the importance of these in discussing the positive outcomes of their action learning experiences.

There were also examples of schools that had previously developed learning teams or groups that formed the core of their action learning team. Where this was the case, often levels of collegial group relationships, risk and trust had already been established. Notwithstanding this, however, as indicated below, participation in *Action learning for school teams* also was reported as extending the levels of risk, trust and collegiality that had been previously established.

2) School strategic/development plan

The large majority of submissions, reports and interviewees recorded teacher professional learning and/or pedagogy as explicit aspects or priorities in their school strategic or development plan. If this was the case then there already existed a context and framework into which the action learning project could be located. Certainly in case study schools, rather than being perceived as something additional or external, the action learning project was simply an extension of an existing priority or framework, along with whatever executive, committee and other forms of support had already been developed. This was reported as an important factor in facilitating the project and the transfer of its outcomes more widely in the school.

3) Knowledge of action learning

The main purpose of the *Action learning for school teams* project was to engage school teams in action learning. The Action learning handbook was produced with the intention of informing teachers and project coordinators about the nature, purposes and processes of action learning. It would have been reasonable, therefore, to expect project participants and academic partners to have knowledge of the nature and processes of action learning. Generally, however, this was not the case. While not requested in reports, there were few interviewees able to articulate a detailed definition of action learning. There was also a deal of confused understanding of the nature of action learning demonstrated by academic partners.

Generally, reports, interviewees and most academic partners identified one or more of the phases of action learning. There was also evidence in the activities of all projects of a number of the key characteristics of action learning as identified by Revans. These included the focus on workplace learning, the collegial nature of the learning and the application to changed teacher and classroom practice through planning and action and, to a lesser extent, structured reflection.

4) Evidence of action learning

The very large majority of reports made claims of evidence of action learning, particularly in the form of teaching resources produced. As self reports, however, the claims or the quality of the evidence cannot be investigated. The degree to which the cycles of planning, acting, gathering information and reflection was achieved in an explicit and detailed manner, as reported by interviewees varied greatly. There were some case study projects where there was explicit evidence of the professional learning of participants, particularly in the high quality of teaching resources (eg., lessons, units, assessment tasks) and in the manner in which teachers talked about their practice. However, in a number of the cases there were more claims of this than explicit evidence. There is a strong need to work towards a much stronger notion of evidence- based practice and change. In support of this, only one project evaluation report identified the need for evidence as one of the things they had learnt from their experience and only three projects suggested that a stronger emphasis on evidence was one of the key changes they would make to any action learning programs. In addition, a number of academic partners did not seem to understand that gathering evidence about teaching practice was a central element of action learning.

There was some ambivalence reported by a small number of reports and interviewees, including some principals about observing peers' classes and gathering evidence. There is no doubt that where teachers were prepared to risk and do this they reported it as one of the most powerful learning experiences.

There is no evidence in any of the cases studied of the explicit tracking of individual's and team's professional learning journeys. Although 29 evaluation reports identified some form of journal as evidence of learning no examples were included. While some of the case studies intended to employ reflective learning journals of some form, in the large majority of the cases this did not occur. Lack of time and pressure of other work related tasks seemed to be the main reasons reported for not continuing with journals.

5) Strategic thinking and planning

A feature of many project submissions and of all case study projects was some level of strategic thinking about the project and its processes within the context of the school(s). The nature and degree of such strategic thinking seemed to be an important factor in the smooth integration of the project into other school activities and organization. For example, such thinking included selecting small teams to generate energy and be a catalyst for wider school change including, executive team upskilling. Only a few of the case study projects and, by inference from reports, few other projects, considered the implications of spanning across two school years. This time frame meant that there would likely be changes in staff and allocation of staff to stages and classes.

A further aspect of such strategic thinking was a notion of 'thinking big but doing small'. This was characteristic of the large majority of the case study projects. A small number of reports also suggested that schools would concentrate on a smaller scale project next time.

6) Role of principal/leadership/executive in school

An issue not commented on very much in the reports but a very important factor in every one of the case studies was the role of the principal(s) and executive staff. In some cases the principal or a member of the executive was the project coordinator, sometimes a team participant and sometimes they elected to remain separate from the team. It was the attitude of the principal towards the project and the project team, however, that was more important than the role(s) played. Active support of the team and its work by the principal was characteristic of all case studies. It was the delegation of ownership and responsibility for the project and its carriage within an atmosphere of affirmation and trust, however, that was even more important. An explicit recognition of the work of the team and its worth and an expression of this to other staff was reported as a critical factor in the success of interviewees' projects.

The relationship between principal and academic partner should also be noted. Generally academic partners reported a supportive positive relationship with principals. In a small number of cases, however, the effective work of the academic partner was reportedly stifled by a principal who wished to control aspects of the project and its outcomes.

7) Composition/selection of team participants

Most reports and interviewees indicated that project team members were volunteers. However, there were examples in the case study projects where a decision was made by a principal to involve all staff. Although there may have been initial reservations, even resistance reported by some interviewees, generally these same participants were strong in praise of their experience and were glad that they had been participants in the project.

Project team composition was affected by the means of selection and the characteristics of participants. If the team were volunteers, then the representation of KLAs, stages etc depended on who volunteered. In some cases, however, there were deliberate decisions as to the composition of team members to represent particular subject areas, particular roles in the school (eg., executive staff) or teachers of specific classes or stages.

8) Collegiality

Working in teams was one of the central components of *Action learning for school teams*. It is also one of the key characteristics of action learning as identified by Revans. It was also the element probably mentioned most frequently in reports

The size of teams reported varied from five or six members to over 50 members. While no optimum size group emerged from the evidence gathered, most projects tended to have six to ten team members. The size of teams did not appear to be a problem since only a small number of reports suggested that they would either reduce or increase the size of the team employed in their project.

Particularly in larger, and across school teams, individuals often found that they were members of smaller sub teams or pairs, and it was the membership of this smaller group that was the major organisational unit for their work. While not so evident in the reports,

but for most interviewees, it was the loyalty and felt responsibility to a peer 'buddy' or members of a small group that was the major driving force towards team members completing their project work. This was particularly in projects where some momentum may have been lost in a larger whole team.

Collegiality, arguably is much more than simply working on a project with someone. It denotes a strong sense of a commitment to a shared purpose, in the case of *Action learning for school teams*, learning together; a willingness to suspend judgement in the interests of exploring and better understanding alternative beliefs and ideas, to engage in 'intellectual struggle' (Reece, 1994) and to forgo personal preference for the sake of collective decision making and welfare; a willingness to trust others and to risk with them in ways that have real consequences based on a mutual respect for them as persons and professional colleagues. It is such collegiality that forms one of the important platforms of an effective professional learning community (Ewing,2002; Fullan, 1993; Nias, et al., 1992; Smyth,1998),

The most important factor contributing to the development and support of collegiality identified by the large majority of reports and interviewees was the opportunity to come together with time for extended professional discussion, work and reflection. There were numerous examples of reports and interviewees expressing that such opportunities were privileges that they valued and that were not often available

9) Action learning activities

Action learning for school teams was designed to make provision for specific school contexts, purposes, participants and their professional needs. Typically, the action learning cycle began with whole team sessions, most often with the academic partner where participants were given opportunities to be introduced to and engage with the NSW model of pedagogy. Such activities most often included some viewing, coding and discussion of one or more of the video resources.

The next set of activities for project teams generally involved identifying a selected number of the elements from the NSW model and engaging with these in strategies relating to teachers' classroom practice. This was either at individual level, with a 'buddy' who sometimes was teaching the same stage, or multi stage across schools.

Evidence from reports and from case studies suggest that the purposes and outcomes emerging from such planning sessions tended to be more directly focused around the resources to emerge (e.g. lessons, units, programs, assessment tasks) rather than on outcomes more specifically related to other professional learning and development. For example, 34 of 48 evaluation reports indicated some form of product as evidence of their action learning. In addition, most interviewees reported that purposes for their action learning activities tended to be more focussed on either learning about the NSW model of pedagogy and/or developing lessons, units etc rather than advancing understanding other aspects of their own professional knowledge and pedagogy.

Planning for some classroom practice and the implementation of planning generally comprised the next set of activities. Implementation activities usually consisted of individual, pair or team planning followed by the implementation of the results of the planning. This was most often followed by some form of discussion of the implementation typically in Term1, 2004.

Some form of evidence of classroom observation is claimed in half the reports. These include photos, videos, or some form of observation sheets. In a number of projects this included peer observation and/or team teaching while the implementation was taking place. In a minority of projects, observation was by the academic partner. In some cases the observation was via video recording that was then discussed later by the team. In some projects, by agreement, the video was only made available, in the first instance, to the teacher who had taught the lesson. In two of the case study projects students were involved in the video recording.

The degree to which participants were prepared to be observed or videoed and then have their work discussed was to some extent a measure of the levels of risk, trust and collegiality that had been developed in the project team. Sixteen projects reported increased levels of these as evidence of professional learning. Those case study participants who were members of a team in which some of the team had been prepared to be observed and their teaching discussed reported that once this happened the first time other team members were more willing to be observed themselves. Interviewees also reported that one of the important outcomes of having their lesson videoed and discussed was the affirmation of their practice by colleagues.

Interviewees suggested that the most powerful learning activities were those in which they engaged actively with peers in translating the ideas of the NSW model into activities for their own students in their own classrooms. While whole team sessions introducing the NSW model of pedagogy and coding the videos were generally reported as useful, they were not seen as powerful as the activities in which participants were actively working to engage the model with their own practice. Half of the reports identified the fact that action learning is owned by teachers and focuses on their everyday professional needs as two of its most important features.

Evidence in reports suggests that all project schools have engaged in activities to translate the NSW model into their practice. There was little explicit evidence, however, of project teams moving beyond this to well founded critique of the model. While evidence about this is difficult to ascertain from reports there was certainly evidence of such critique in two of the case study projects. The Valley View team had engaged prior to the release of the discussion paper in work and discussion examining quality teaching. This provided a strong base from which to develop critique. This also occurred in Wartarra where participants critically examined the efficacy of the NSW model of pedagogy in relation to special needs students.

Possibly the stage in the action learning cycle for which there is least detailed explicit evidence is that of reflection. Certainly, the resources and activities included with and in

the *Classroom practice guide* provided potential for penetrating reflection if employed effectively. While many of the activities recorded in reports suggest the potential for reflection and many reports use the word *reflection*, it is difficult to ascertain the exact nature and quality of the reflection that may have resulted. Further, while it may be inferred from the interviews, (which themselves were a form of reflection and recognised as such by a number of the interviewees) that reflection was an element of a number of the activities, this seemed to be more of an informal conversational nature.

Arguably, the most powerful reflection requires deliberate focus with a clearly specified purpose supported by some form of, usually written scaffold (Smith, 1999). Reflection based on remembered events is not as powerful in its potential for learning as is revisiting evidence of thinking or practice previously gathered, such as re-reading ideas written at a recent time after an activity or event. Similarly, as many interviewees recognised, reflection based upon self reports is likely to be less powerful than when it is undertaken with someone who has been engaged in observation and evidence gathering.

10) Time

Time was the issue most commented upon by all projects. Time was also one of the strongest issues identified at the *Action learning for school teams* conferences at the end of Term 1, 2004. Five main issues were identified. The *Action learning for school teams* management team had little, if any, control over any of these. One issue was the choice of school terms. This was probably the issue commented on most strongly, by 36 projects. Views expressed were that Term 4 was possibly the most difficult term because of the end of year examination and reporting demands and presentations. Some interviewees in secondary schools, however, commented that this term was useful because Years 10 and 12 students leave school reasonably early in the term, thus creating opportunities for meetings, release time. Term 1 was seen as difficult because of the need to establish routines and procedures with new classes.

Another issue was the length of time for the project. Theoretically this was a maximum of 20 weeks. In practice, however, it was probably more like 15-18 weeks. From evidence of at least 18 reports it may have been more like 10 weeks. While there were criticisms of this time frame, the criticism was not unanimous. Again, criticism was less from those projects which had done some strategic thinking about the implications of the length of project time. A number of project reports and some interviewees actually saw the restricted time frame as useful because it set limits to the project and provided a stimulus to completion.

It is well established in the literature of school change that the most effective change requires pressure with support and several projects explicitly mentioned this in their evaluation reports. There is no doubt that the relatively short time frame and reporting requirements acted as a strong incentive for project work and its completion.

Professional learning takes time. Thirty nine reports identified this as one of the things learnt about action learning. Time was also reiterated by 12 reports as an important issue about using action learning as a model for professional development.

A related issue raised concerning time was how to create it in the organizational life of schools. This was of particular concern when there would no longer be the funds such as those provided by the *Action learning for school teams* project. The issue of sustainability of action learning as a form of professional development in project schools after the *Action learning for school teams* project is finished is highly significant. From evidence gathered, it would be the hypothesis of the evaluators that action learning will be sustained most effectively in those project schools which see learning, and particularly teacher learning, as central to their core business, have this explicitly as an element of their school development plan and have already been creative in their use of time (eg., collaborative decision that all meetings of staff will focus on learning and not administration).

11) Funding and teacher release

All reports and interviewees stated that funds provided by the *Action learning for school teams* project were the most important support for their project. A very common comment was, 'it would not have happened without the money'. On the other hand, from reports and interviews there were a small number of schools where funds had already been committed to provide support for teachers to work on the NSW model of pedagogy, although the amount of money would have been reportedly less than what they received through their participation in the *Action learning for school teams*. In the main, funding was used for the release of teachers from classroom teaching. In addition, some minor amounts were spent on the hire of venues for activities and for catering, and resources.

Funds spent on social activity were certainly important to interviewees. It is well established in literature associated with organisational change that opportunities for social interaction are essential to building collegiality and successful organisational cultures.

Funding on its own, however, did not automatically result in release time. Teachers find it very hard to leave classes, particularly in secondary schools, years 10 and 12. Sometimes this was because of not wanting to leave the students. Other times it was because of the extra work in preparation to leave classes and/or the follow up work that was necessary after returning to their classroom.

Such comments raise interesting questions as to whether teachers should be expected to undertake professional development only during work time-ie., traditional school hours, or whether, as in other professions, they should be expected to undertake professional learning largely in their own time. It also raises questions concerning whether in general teacher professional development should be funded by the employer, or, again as in other professions, be largely self funded. These are much bigger questions than can be addressed in this evaluation report. They will, however, become increasingly significant as schools are provided with professional development monies, the new Professional learning policy is implemented and the expectations of teacher credentialing become more defined through the work of the NSW Institute of teaching.

A final issue related to funding not evidenced in reports but raised by interviewees was that of the creation of elites. The phenomena of perceived elites in contexts of organisational change is well recognised. These were obviously projects that did not involve all staff. It is again an issue that requires careful management.

12) Academic partners
Forty four projects reported that they were satisfied with the work of and relationship with their academic partner.

Where partnerships with academic partners worked well, they worked very well. Features of these partnerships were previously established relationships with the project school, clarity in the negotiation of explicit roles and responsibilities and an approach from the academic partner that affirmed what teachers already knew and built on this collaboratively to address their professional needs.

Where the participation of academic partners was reported as problematic, interviewees identified several reasons:

- more explicit general information regarding possible roles and desirable qualities of an academic partner in a successful partnership was identified as being useful to future projects
- there should be the opportunity for an academic partner and a school to discuss the aspirations for and focus of a project and together have the opportunity to decide on whether they wanted to work together prior to a memorandum of understanding being signed. In such discussions expectations regarding specific roles of the academic partner could be clarified
- the notion of 'critical friend' and the detailed roles and actions that this implies were not necessarily able to be articulated in any detail by the academic partners
- long distances to travel to project schools occupied much of their time and reduced the time that they were able to give to the projects
- only a minority of academic partners reported active positive support from their faculties or universities for their role.

13) Support from DET
There was unanimous agreement from case study coordinators and many other interviewees, that one of the most important factors in the success of their projects was the role played by the *Action learning for school teams* project manager.

A number of interviewees in case study schools reported on how important it was to them to have someone from the project come to visit them and be interested in their work: it lent a human face to the *Action learning for school teams* project. Travelling constantly during the duration of the project and being away from her desk, however, did not prevent her also being able to respond quickly to email or telephone inquiries. Again, the speed with which she communicated with schools requesting assistance was also commented on by case study interviewees. The only difficulties reported were technical difficulties with computers in being able to download material sent via email and the web.

14) Project coordination
There were no difficulties related to project coordination identified in any reports or by any of the case study project coordinators.

The main leadership roles reported included inspiring and motivating the team, facilitating agreement about purpose and direction, building commitment to the project, enabling risk and trust and bolstering team members when things were not going successfully. Often it also included volunteering to be the first one to have lessons videoed or observed. The leadership role of the *Action learning for school teams* project coordinator and commitment to the project and the team was integral to the project's success.

15) Future
As reported, the very large majority of interviewees would participate in an action learning project again. Similarly, all reports stated that their schools would use action learning again. The task for project schools now is to build on the professional learning that has been realised by the *Action learning for school teams* and to sustain the opportunities for professional learning provided by the project. Thirty eight reports indicated extensions of the work of the action learning project. Generally this was an extension to other KLAs or stages or faculties or into assessment regimes. In a number of case study schools it included the extension of the learning of the project team to the whole school staff.

Many reports and all case study schools recognise that sustaining the learning that has occurred as a result of the *Action learning for school teams* will be challenging. Many recognise, however, that they can build on both the experience of using some form of the action learning model and the learning about professional learning that has emerged from that experience. A minority report the possibility of using professional development funds to support further action learning around the NSW model. The privilege that *Action learning for school teams* project schools have had to experience action learning as a form of professional development should mean that they have a strong store of ideas to draw on when making decisions about the organization of their professional development programs.

Section 7 - Conclusions & Recommendations

Gathering incontrovertible evidence concerning the conditions that facilitate teacher professional learning and its impact on changed classroom practice, especially within a limited time frame of two terms, is difficult and problematic. With those caveats, there is no doubt that evidence gathered supports a conclusion that overall the *Action learning for school teams* project has been an outstanding success in relation to its central goals of increased professional learning and understanding by school teams. This conclusion is supported by evidence drawn from final reports from the case study projects and from the visits and observations made by evaluation team members during the course of the projects. The central question of the evaluation focussed on the specific conditions necessary to make action learning effective in NSW public schools. The conclusions and recommendations specifically address this question.

The degree of success in different aspects of the *Action learning for school teams* project varies considerably. Those projects that appeared to be most successful were characterised by:

- a successful previous experience of school-based change particularly in which teachers have worked collegially in teams investigating practice
- a school community culture that focused on learning and emphasised teacher learning
- a project plan that was:
    - achievable within the parameters of the project and the context of the school and its activities
    - carefully designed through collaboration of at least key prospective team members, and
    - focused around purposes and anticipated outcomes that reflected priorities clearly identified by the school, often in school development plans, and the professional needs of teachers in their everyday classroom practice
- an environment and staff that were prepared for the project and its demands, impacts and anticipated outcomes
- a school executive leadership that was actively supportive but delegated ownership of and responsibility for the projects' activities to the project team, even if the principal or executive were members of the team
- strong, sensitive and distributed leadership by a project coordinator(s) who also managed the project and maintained strong communication with all members of the team and with other staff in the school
- a number of teachers who were committed to both their own learning and professional development and that of all team members as well as how this learning could be used to improve their practice and students' learning experiences and outcomes
- clearly planned, purposeful flexible opportunities for team members to learn, plan, act and reflect in environments engendering high levels of risk and trust resulting in powerful learning relating to their own classroom practice
- engagement in the professional learning of the team, where appropriate of other school community members including other staff, students and members of the wider school community
- a flexibly arranged relationship with an academic partner based in reasonably close proximity to the project school (s) based on clear expectations of roles and

responsibilities, who had knowledge specific to the purposes and outcomes of the project and acted in a way to affirm the knowledge teachers already possessed and guided them as a critical friend in focused processes of professional learning that teachers controlled, and

- a context in which team members knew that their work and learning was highly valued by others in the school community and will form the basis of ongoing wider and sustained learning in that community by themselves and others.

The most important factors contributing to the success of the *Action learning for school teams* case study projects reported by participants were the discretionary funding and personnel support provided as part of the *Action learning for school teams* project. This included support from both the project manager and academic partners. Other important factors were the collegiality and collaboration developed as a result of teachers, and sometimes teachers and students, working together both within a school and across schools.

Patton's model of Utilization Focused Evaluation employed in the evaluation was very effective and suited the evaluation question and the phenomena being evaluated. It provided important opportunities for negotiation with intended users to clarify purposes and report formats, to ensure that information gathered during the evaluation was appropriate and did not unduly interfere with projects, participants and schools and that the records on which the case study accounts were based were accurate and verified by project team members and coordinators.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
Nine recommendations flow from the evaluation and evidence gathered. These recommendations are designed to ensure that the use of action learning as a form of professional development and learning for teachers in schools in NSW becomes even more effective than that experienced by participants in the *Action learning for school teams* project.

Recommendation 1: That action learning based on small teams of teachers strategically selected by schools and having opportunities of external support be continued as a major form of professional development in NSW public schools.

Recommendation 2: That follow-up research during 2004/5 be undertaken with a number of selected schools that participated in the *Action learning for school teams* project to investigate to what extent and how action learning has been sustained in those schools. Such research would contribute to the case record of recommendation 3.

Recommendation 3: That the case studies gathered in the current evaluation, particularly those that are high quality exemplars of action learning, and any further case studies gathered be used as the basis of a case record (Stenhouse, 1975) for the purposes of informing schools, principals and teachers of the most effective ways to use action learning for teacher professional learning and development. As a beginning to this, it is recommended that the case studies from the current project be made available to all

public schools in NSW and particularly any schools selected as future action learning project schools prior to them engaging in their project.

Recommendation 4: That, in any future projects using academic partners or any other form of support external to the DET, a meeting(s) occur between the school and their intended academic partner prior to the start of the project and prior to any formal agreement being signed. The purposes of such a meeting(s) would be to negotiate expected project purposes and the specific expectations of the roles and responsibilities of the external partner and for both parties to decide whether they wished to continue with the proposed arrangement.

Recommendation 5: That prior to the beginning of any future projects based on action learning a training day be held for participants in school action learning teams and their respective academic partners. The purpose of the training day would be to inform all participants of the nature and processes of action learning and those conditions that are likely to produce the most effective action learning and professional learning. In this there should be a strong and explicit emphasis on evidence-based practice, ways of providing such evidence of teacher professional learning including protocols for focused and purposeful critical reflection.

Recommendation 6: That in future projects involving academic partners strategies should be developed to ensure that university heads of school and/or deans of education in universities from which academic partners will be drawn are informed in detail of the project, its purposes and the role and responsibilities that any academic partner is expected to assume. They should be encouraged to see the role of academic partner as an integral part of the workload of an academic in Education and as a member of a university that believes it is committed to teacher learning and the improvement of the teaching profession. Further, a head of school or dean or other senior management member of the relevant university should be a co-signatory to every memorandum of understanding involving one of their academic staff.

Recommendation 7: That in any future projects employing action learning as a professional learning strategy the role of the project manager be similar to that of the *Action learning for school teams* project manager, that is 'hands on' and spending much of the allotted time on project sites working with action learning teams. Evidence gathered in the evaluation clearly demonstrates that nature of action learning projects and the phenomena of learning demands early support at the project site and not from a distant office telephone or computer.

Recommendation 8: That in selecting schools for future funded action learning projects evidence of the following criteria be strongly considered: history of successful previous school-based change; the focus of the proposed project is a central component of the school plan and its priorities; teacher professional learning is part of the core business of the school; the purposes, anticipated outcomes and strategies to achieve them are clear and are achievable given the time frame and other parameters of the project. It is these criteria, evidence of which was available in the original submission for funding, that

proved to be very useful predictors of successful *Action learning for school teams* projects.

Recommendation 9: That the opportunity for funded independent evaluation of the processes and experiences of action learning teams be continued. As part of any such evaluation there should be attempts made to investigate and record the detailed tracking of the learning journeys of both individuals and teams engaged in action learning projects. It is such tracking that will enable understanding of the processes of action learning and the conditions that make it effective as a model of teacher professional development beyond that that has been able to be achieved in the present evaluation.

It is interesting to note that teachers participating in the *Action learning for school teams* project identified all of the strengths of action learning originally asserted by Revans. These included the importance of collaborative learning where the knowledge and ideas of each group member are essential to the learning of the group, the location of the learning in the school and the focus of the learning on issues that were directly related to the everyday concerns and practices of the teachers.

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