

S P R I N G 2 0 0 4

The School as a Professional Learning Community:

Perspectives from Tasmanian and
English schools on the essentials for
creating a community of learning
in a school

Annette Hollingsworth

Principal of Cressy District High School, Tasmania, Australia

Contents

Contents	2
Introduction	3
Background.....	5
The EPLC project	6
Findings of my interviews with headteachers	10
Similarities and differences.....	21
Lessons from my visit to the UK that will influence me in my principalship.....	23
Bibliography	25

Introduction

In 2002, I was in my third year as Assistant Principal at Brooks High School in Launceston, Tasmania. Brooks High School is a progressive and successful high school with nationally acclaimed programmes and a strong reliance on effective teams to underpin the school's beliefs and practices. It is a challenging environment with low socio-economic pressures. Our leader was visionary in his thinking and practice, and the leadership team (including middle management) was particularly strong.

With the focus throughout Tasmania on a new curriculum, referred to as the Essential Learnings, we were reflecting on our achievements as a learning centre for all. At the same time, we were assisting a number of local schools (at their request) in their challenge of establishing a professional learning community and embarking upon change. These sessions left me pondering the following questions:

- How do schools support powerful learning for all their members, students and teachers alike?
- How are they sustained?
- What stands in their way?
- How do the contexts within which schools work affect the ability of educators to achieve their goals?
- What is the nature of leadership in powerful learning communities, particularly within challenging contexts?
- What have we learnt about how to teach our students well and how to foster deeper understanding?

To answer these questions, I referred to research and various publications, particularly exploring the writings of Linda Darling Hammond, Bill Mulford, Judith Warren Little and Louise Stoll. Similarly, initial and ongoing Essential Learning support reading lists made reference to Professor Louise Stoll's research and her theories on school improvement, capacity, professional learning communities, school culture and leadership. This underpinned much of the thinking behind our new Tasmanian curriculum framework.

Late in 2002, the Tasmanian Department of Education invited teachers to become involved in a field of study to increase the levels of engagement of all students with the Tasmanian school curriculum with particular focus on the Essential Learnings Framework. This new framework focuses on what is central to the curriculum for Tasmanian teachers. The study would provide an opportunity for teachers to enrich their knowledge, skills and understanding through further studies and research.

I made contact with Professor Stoll, who invited me to Bath University as an NCSL International Research Associate to work with her and Professor Mike Wallace on the EPLC (Effective Professional Learning Communities) Project. With my department's endorsement, I embarked upon an enlightening six-week study period in the United Kingdom.

To assist Brooks High School to maintain momentum, I wanted to examine the characteristics of professional learning communities and particularly to compare communities in similarly challenging contexts to my own school.

At the end of the year I was informed that I was to take up a new position as Principal of a struggling rural District High School (kindergarten to Grade 10) near

Launceston. My questions and reflections on leadership now had greater meaning and relevance.

In this report, the study tour summary will be presented, firstly with a synopsis of the changes occurring in the Tasmanian education system that have created the need for schools to become professional learning communities. The report will then cover the aims and activities of the English Effective Professional Learning Communities project with initial focus on the emerging themes of the inaugural workshop for case study schools. Following this is an account of my involvement with case study schools, along with discussion on findings from interviews of English headteachers. Comparative interview findings with Tasmanian principals are then discussed, and similarities and differences highlighted.

The report concludes with a summary of learnings that will influence my principalship and assist me to develop and sustain an effective professional learning community.

Background

The Essential Learnings Framework and the Tasmanian focus on learning communities

The Essential Learnings Framework is designed to:

- reduce problems of a crowded curriculum
- engage learners more deeply in their learning
- make learning more relevant
- improve learning across all areas
- develop higher-order thinking
- support the transfer of learning

Similarly, the framework is underpinned by these principles:

The curriculum must:

- focus on understanding, deep knowing, rigour and depth
- embody and reflect the values outlined in the Values and Purposes Statement
- enact the purposes described in the Values and Purposes Statement
- interconnect and interrelate knowledge, skills and dispositions within and across the essential areas of learning
- engage learners in authentic achievement
- foster diversity and inclusive practices in the achievement of common goals
- include a focus on pedagogy
- describe content that is significant and worth knowing
- clearly state what learning is expected
- build continuity and coherence for all learners from birth onwards

The five curriculum organisers, Thinking, Communicating, Personal Futures, Social Responsibility and World Futures provide a memorable framework, a focus for teaching and learning, and a means of selecting significant content.

The Essential Learnings Framework has been developed through a process of co-construction. A team of educators called the Curriculum Consultation Team has worked closely with selected project schools and consulted key representatives of children's services. Co-construction of the framework has involved considerable debate, examination of curriculum models and trials of draft documents by educators to determine how useful they are for curriculum planning. These strongly consultative processes also enabled groups and stakeholders, eg students, parents, teachers and business people, to contribute.

The process of co-construction clearly recognises that improvements in education are much more successful if stakeholders are actively involved. This methodology puts practitioners at the heart of the curriculum development process and ensures that the results are relevant, practical and useful.

The co-construction process has modelled a highly effective collaborative process and an "inside out" process to enable change. As schools are now developing a relevant and stimulating curriculum for their students, they are aware that they need to become effective professional learning communities. Teachers need to approach this huge challenge in teams rather than individually. It is a time to work and learn together and share the expertise of all professionals within the school community.

The EPLC project

How effective professional learning communities in schools are created and sustained

What is the EPLC project?

The Effective Professional Learning Communities (EPLC) project is a collaborative venture between the Universities of Bristol and Bath, and Institute of Education, University of London, funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE). It is carrying out a longitudinal, mixed methodological study exploring professional learning communities as they go through different stages of their development.

Taking place from January 2002 to October 2004, the EPLC is examining, for the first time in England, what a professional learning community is, what makes it effective, and how such a community is created and sustained (see Stoll et al, 2003).

Project aims

The broad aims are to

- 1) identify and convey:
 - the characteristics of 'professional learning communities' and what these look like in different school settings and at different stages of development – early starter, developer and mature
 - key factors inside and outside schools that seem to help or hinder the initial creation, ongoing management and longer-term sustaining of such communities
 - innovative and effective practices in managing human and financial resources to create time and opportunity for ongoing professional learning and development and to optimise its impact
- 2) generate models that illuminate the principles of effective professional learning communities and assess the transferability of such models
- 3) produce and disseminate sufficiently compelling findings to practitioners to mobilise further their practice around effective professional learning communities
- 4) inform leadership preparation and development programmes and initial, induction and continuing professional development programmes, including those for subject leaders and those co-ordinating special educational needs

Project activities

During the project, the team is:

- carrying out an extensive survey of the literature
- developing a framework of characteristics and outcome indicators of effective professional learning communities
- surveying the headteachers and Continued Professional Development (CPD) co-ordinators of a sample of nursery, primary, secondary and special schools throughout England and providing staff in these schools with feedback
- carrying out detailed case studies in 16 different types of school settings or clusters and producing accounts of how members of school-wide professional learning communities promote and work to sustain these communities
- examining links between the characteristics of effective professional learning communities and student progress

- bringing project leaders from the 16 case study schools together to discuss and enrich emerging findings
- exploring the impact of being in a professional learning community for pupils, teachers and support staff, both as individuals and across the organisation

The inaugural two-day workshop for case study schools

This workshop brought project leaders of the case study schools together for the first time. Opportunities were provided for:

- the sharing of practical information about each other's situation and perspectives
- considering the practical implications of the research literature
- reviewing the project's emerging findings and their implications
- identifying emerging themes for follow-up conferences and work

There was a strong sense of engagement in this collaborative research project and consequently it would be accurate to describe the large group as working towards becoming a professional learning network in its own right.

The various information sharing sessions, activities and discussions of the workshop resulted in the following major themes emerging:

- Leaders require **specific personal qualities** that make them dynamic in their leadership. They need to provide a vision for the school, matched by continued professional development and collaborative practices. School leaders require the confidence to live school life according to their values and must be continual learners themselves, who then provide a model of this commitment to their staff. Flexibility (especially in the light of the national curriculum), risk-taking and the nurturing of growth in all school members were stated as characteristics essential to headteachers who are able to create and sustain effective learning communities. Allowing programmes and initiatives to develop 'organically' was seen as a desired practice, as was providing a voice for staff sharing.
- Leaders require **leadership know-how** and an understanding of and commitment to dispersed and distributed leadership (Gronn, 2003). Using the right language was seen as crucial and this translates into being able to ask the right questions, and provide and engage in good dialogue, both personally and educationally (Gronn, 2003).
- The group discussions stressed the importance of leaders in schools having empathy with staff and addressing the **emotional wellbeing** of all in the school community. This is more than just knowledge management, as personal skills are also essential for the development of relationships and providing a holistic education and understanding of people. Key concepts and characteristics such as collegiality, job satisfaction, empathy, staff morale and trust were stated to be of great importance for school leaders and require strategies and ongoing evaluation for success.
- Headteachers need to develop a **family-like community**, with all working together, looking after each other and developing ownership. A clear distinction between organisation and community was made, with community being the main driver of purpose, vision and connectivity.

-
- There was a strong message that the case studies should highlight the uniqueness of schools, based on the **impact of context and the value of relationships**. There was a further acknowledgement that this analysis would benefit from a further study of the notion of sub-communities in schools, and a recognition of the ever-changing nature of effective professional learning communities.

My involvement in the case studies

By the time of I arrived, interviews in the case study schools had already started and the research team had developed a rapport with the headteacher and staff in leadership positions. I accompanied Professor Stoll to some schools, observed a number of interviews and conducted my own interviews with headteachers. The aim of the interviews was to enable me learn more about leadership and effective professional learning communities. On returning home to Tasmania, I conducted a further four interviews where the same questions were explored. The responses to these interviews enabled me to draw some conclusions from my study and guided me in my new leadership role.

Scope of interviews

Interviews took approximately one hour. Every attempt has been made to present the responses in the context and actual language used by the respondents. All schools were co-educational.

The main areas of focus for English and Australian heads were:

- i) How do you see your leadership of the professional learning community?
What do you do?
What are you aiming for?
- ii) In what ways do you distribute leadership?
To whom?
How?
What are the challenges in doing so?
What needs to be done to make it work?
Are there down sides to distributing leadership?
- iii) How does the context of your school influence your approach to leadership of the professional learning community?
- iv) What advice would you give to a newcomer?
What are the 'tricks of the trade'?
What do you consider are the strategies for early success?

English schools: a brief overview

I identified the English case study schools in part from results to a survey undertaken as part of the EPLC project. I visited six schools, located in five LEAs throughout England. There was one nursery school, two primary schools and three secondary schools. The size of these schools varied markedly. There were also significant differences between schools in their ethnic mix and percentage of students receiving free school meals. Finally the six schools were at different stages of effective learning communities (eplc).

A Tasmanian perspective

Tasmanian schools suitable for case studies were identified in part through discussion with my District Superintendent. This selection advice was based on analysis and discussion on the stages and characteristics identified in the eplc

project in England. Again, care was taken to ensure that those included were at different points in the development of their respective eplc. Geographically, while all schools were from the same district, they were from a mix of urban and rural communities. Again variations in size were marked. The schools visited comprised one secondary college, one high school and two primary schools.

Findings of my interviews with headteachers

Perceptions of leadership of the professional learning community

Several key threads emerged from the interviews with the English headteachers. Firstly, they highlighted the importance of **recognising and developing teams** within their schools. These teams were seen as providers of professional development and support. In the larger schools, teams were also viewed as a crucial means of covering the huge workload, providing close associations and achieving the many goals that schools set for themselves. One headteacher described himself as a team member and a number of headteachers described their schools as a team where decisions were made collectively, and initiatives and strategies were developed together.

Two English headteachers commented that for their team to be working well, it meant all staff, not just teachers. It was also considered divisive to involve some staff and not others. Therefore, teacher aides were always included in planning and activities. Students were also viewed as leaders.

Many of the English school leaders spoke about the importance of developing a **reflective workplace**, modelling reflective practice, asking the right questions and encouraging staff to ask questions about their practice, values and purposes. In one school, a headteacher described herself as a reflective practitioner and stated that achieving this for her staff was one of her major aims. Initially, staff had voiced their aversion to her philosophy. However she set up a written evaluation requirement and at the time of interview, some teachers were regularly writing copious reflections on their practice. This practice had set a tone in the school and significantly helped school improvement. A number of headteachers spoke with pride about their staff's readiness to ask questions. One head acknowledged her strong reliance on reflective practices and her desire to plan strategically had inspired her to start her doctorate.

On a number of occasions, English headteachers spoke about the value of encouraging and enabling staff to **visit other schools**. These visits were seen as a means of encouraging staff to assess their personal educational journey, to learn from others and to create networks. For staff who observe others' lessons within their own school, this was considered to be a logical and sequential advancement.

Coaching was discussed in nearly all interviews conducted in England. One headteacher was very committed to coaching and was regularly assisted by a coach who was once a secondary leader himself. This coaching process included asking questions that led to the headteacher deciding on the preferred choice of action. The coach modelled the process that the head then employed with her staff. She strongly believed that the process greatly assisted in the area of leadership and school improvement.

In like manner, the Tasmanian interviews also drew out key threads. Three of the four principals emphasised the significance of **building good relationships** for professional learning communities to be creative and effective in operation. For example, one principal expressed the view that building positive and strong relationships was the lynchpin of the community and school and they established a working and supportive rapport. Her aim was to develop the skills of others in this area. She felt that leaders must constantly strive to be aware of conversations, opportunities and networks, and appreciate their significance. She believed that if positive relationships were developed, then the processes were possible. Another principal stated that he aimed to build and maintain strong collegiality to help his

school be a professional learning community, whilst another principal identified developing positive relationships as her priority.

Similarly, three Tasmanian principals spoke with commitment about developing **leadership skills and leadership density**. One principal spoke of leadership professional development sessions that she encouraged all staff to attend. She was committed to anyone interested in developing leadership skills. The focus of these sessions was on what leadership is and the identification of common purposes. In another interview, a principal spoke of her strong commitment to maintaining a very strong leadership team and how she devised strategies to achieve this. She invited staff to develop their skills in this area and to undertake leadership roles. To the same end, she ensured that staff meetings were rich in educational dialogue. A third principal spoke of his efforts to build and maintain strong collegiality and to empower people, especially senior staff, by assuring and reassuring them that they were skilled, experienced educators and that together they can achieve anything.

Many of the Tasmanian principals stated that they were aiming for a **shared vision** within their schools to create professional learning communities. In one case, the principal realised that initially she was not comfortable being vocal about her vision, as she did not know the community well enough at the beginning. It took four years to come up with a statement so, for her, building a vision was a long but crucial process. This long period meant that stakeholders could own this vision, which expressed how the school was running and what it actually wanted to maintain. Her vision ended up being more of a statement of what the school community had become. Another principal spoke of her visions for whole-school goal-setting, the sharing of outcomes and celebrating success. She described these elements as essential if her community was to operate as a sustained learning community.

To achieve these aims, a number of leaders were keen to establish a **culture of enquiry and challenge**, and relied on asking lots of questions such as “why do we do things the way we do?” In discussion, one principal also emphasised that he provided lots of opportunities for many different answers to come from many different sources. Another principal proposed that asking the right questions and engaging in challenging, but not judgmental, dialogue was crucial for improvement. She even encouraged students to get the right messages to teachers by asking questions at every opportunity so that they did not simply accept classroom practices and spoke up when their understanding was insufficient. She believed that sometimes students continued to progress despite uninspiring teaching methodology and viewed this as neither healthy nor ideal.

In discussing their learning community, a number of Tasmanian principals outlined how they relied on the **establishment of new structures** to bring about desired school improvements. In one school, the principal explained how he altered the historical hierarchy and the many layers of management, which relied on the approval of everything by the principal. In another school, the principal described her main aim as getting her staff to realise that they needed to learn more and that change was needed. Her aims were to develop leadership density and move away from the existing hierarchical structure, even though some of her teachers made reference to the hierarchy and would have been happy for it to continue.

Some identified **clear communication** as an essential ingredient of a professional learning community. One principal spoke of his strategies in this area to form a community feeling, such as his weekly summary which he emailed to staff and introducing a “no kettles” policy in individual staff rooms. Examples also extended to the parent body. One principal stated that her school had good communication with the parent body but felt that the school is not adequately catering for parent interest.

She would like to see more sharing of student work with parents and greater opportunities for discussion about curriculum and child development.

Another principal described a process where her **feedback** was provided to staff in the form of an open letter. It was a deliberate strategy she employed to show her interest in staff personally and professionally. She welcomed comments from staff and modelled reflective thinking. She explained that she would prefer to meet regularly with staff but could not possibly achieve this. Every effort was also made to inform the whole community of the current educational learning focus of the various teams and the school as a whole. This dedication to getting to know staff was also expressed by another Tasmanian principal. He outlined discussions he conducted with every staff member and the various teams in the school, to ascertain their aims and provide appropriate support for them.

On two occasions, Tasmanian principals spoke of the invaluable contribution of **celebration and praise** to learning communities. For example, one school leader spoke of the various ways he celebrated success and congratulated staff. One such method was the introduction of a national travelling scholarship for staff, with opportunities for all to apply. Another principal stated that she worked very hard not to overlook any possible celebration of success or offering of praise within her school.

Analysing strategies employed to establish professional learning communities also involved substantially **re-examining the role of teams** within schools. One Tasmanian principal said that developing teams was his clear priority and, similarly, another outlined aims for a team approach in all processes employed to support the learning community of his school.

Distribution of leadership

In all instances, the English headteachers expressed a strong commitment to distributed leadership and spoke of the **strategies** they employed. For example, in one school, a headteacher reported some department leaders were staff not in promoted positions. In another school, leadership was distributed by involving staff in the performance management of other staff and by delegating duties to individuals. In a small rural school, teachers shared the leadership of a curriculum area. One slight variation presented itself where a headteacher was unable to practice her commitment in this area. This was because the staff did not collectively share goals; some practices were not fully professional.

All headteachers agreed that they saw **all staff as potential leaders**, not just those in promoted positions. All leaders spoke of the desirability of increasing the leadership capacity in their school.

Two English headteachers spoke about the value and importance of **good communication skills** in distributing leadership and developing teams. One head believed that communication difficulties were often used as an excuse for not distributing leadership and establishing teams, particularly in large schools. However, another view was that the reverse was true and that, in practice, the presence of effective teams improved communication across the school. This took time and effort but real long-term benefits could be achieved as a result of this approach. Another headteacher believed that distributed leadership in fact relies on the ongoing refinement and expansion of communication skills.

When asked about the **challenges** to distributing leadership, many quoted the need for patience, as well as being able to let go and delegate. Questions about the down side of distributed leadership brought collective responses that there were no long-

term negatives to this approach. The view held was that initially it is easier (and tempting) to perform tasks yourself. However, distributed leadership is recommended for long-term gains although it requires greater **monitoring and evaluating**.

All Tasmanian principals voiced a strong commitment to distributing leadership within their school. In one instance the leader of a school described it as a valuable means of acknowledging and highlighting other people's skills and expertise, as well as enabling the celebration of diversity. He elaborated by saying that he called for volunteers, not conscripts, for some of the leadership roles within the school. The senior staff team met these new leaders and provided them with ongoing support and advice. In another school, distributing leadership needed a "push down" from the hierarchy that previously was in existence. The principal had encouraged new leadership roles and aimed for staff to feel ownership as a means of getting everyone involved in all processes. This was described as a slow process, requiring patience.

In another instance, leadership was described as distributed, to both nominated and self-nominated leaders. The principal believed that **personal commitment** produced some natural leaders and she sought to use these skills and commitment. Being a small school it was almost a given that leadership was distributed. Most delegation and leadership expertise was given to and expected of the second in charge. Together they worked in partnership and decisions about delegation are rarely made individually. This was an area where the principal really valued her colleague's opinion. Distributed leadership to the wider community occurred too. There was a great deal of expertise and commitment to the school in this area.

Another scenario was where the school leader had a strong commitment to distributed leadership, but was unable to put this practice due having no adequately skilled staff. She gave examples of her failed attempts to distribute leadership. She acknowledged that distributed leadership relied on teamwork and that collaborative culture was not strong in her school. Consequently she had had to manipulate teams and, as she was not a manipulative person, this was hard for her to do. She preferred to operate in a more 'honest' manner and be able to value people for what they were, but unfortunately this could not always be the case. She noted she had to "divide and conquer" and proceed with caution because there was a belief amongst many of the staff that those getting paid for a job should be doing it.

When asked about the **methods employed** to achieve distributed leadership, two Tasmanian principals stated that they asked questions as a way of gaining support and appreciation of new leadership roles. Programme managers were also questioned to ascertain how they envisaged achieving their aims. Another approach was to view everything as a problem-solving exercise rather than a task or challenge. In this case, knowing the right questions to ask was the key. The difficulty with this approach was that the "solution" could be slow in arriving and sometimes the direction ends up being different than intended. This principal imagined that some of her colleagues would be frustrated by this and expect her to solve problems.

Another Tasmanian principal spoke of the importance of all staff feeling they **owned school initiatives** and everyone getting involved. He described it as a slow process where patience is required. This principal believed that to distribute leadership, knowledge must be distributed as well. A change in attitude was needed for staff to gain new understandings. There were still some who wanted only to get on with teaching in his school, but it was pointed out to them early on that changes were implemented by the school community, not just the principal or the leadership team, and therefore their involvement was essential. Knowing and understanding staff was also crucial. The discussions he had had about how individuals saw their future had helped lay good foundations in this area.

When asked **what was needed** to make distributed leadership work, one of the Tasmanian principals proposed the following elements:

- clarification of the task and role to enable creativity and the provision of a personal touch
- confirmation that the task fits in with the bigger picture of the school
- clear timeframes
- adequate resources
- opportunities for communication, problem-solving and feedback

Some of the Tasmanian principals' responses to the challenges of distributing leadership produced had ideas in common. Firstly, there was the challenge that, in distributing leadership, a leader has to be able to **let go and trust** that others will have the same level of commitment, energy and effort. In the same way, leaders need to accept that people may make decisions that they, as a leader, would not have done. Furthermore, it was acknowledged by a number of school leaders that this approach can take a lot of management time and that there is a constant need for communication and monitoring.

Worthy of note was the comment by a Tasmanian school leader that the more you work with people, the more you share your values and the easier and simpler the distribution of leadership becomes.

Two Tasmanian principals spoke of the importance of having a **global perspective** on education and always using the various skills of people by delegating and relying on teamwork, helpers and those you have built relationships with. It was considered preferable for leadership to be distributed to teams rather than directly to individuals as this provided additional support and a sense of group responsibility. However, it was also noted that there are tasks that are best done by an individual. In these cases, it is preferable to find someone who is passionate about a job and offer it to them.

Influence of context on leadership approaches

All but one of the English school leaders, saw contextual pressures as significant and as having significant influence on leadership approaches.

For example, the very small, rural and low socio-economic background of one English school produced pressures on that school that could not be ignored.

While the socio-economic situation of many families served by the school was poor, there was nevertheless a real sense of community and a high level of commitment to the area. For this school, cluster meetings with "like schools" were important to assist in strategy development, resource sharing, moderation and curriculum co-ordination. Curriculum co-ordination was shared amongst staff. All staff had areas in which they led and these areas become their focus for professional development. Performance management meetings were held regularly with the head and time was made for regular discussions, support and feedback.

Similarly, the head of another rural school reported that the context of the school had a great impact on her approach to leadership of the professional learning community. This too was a low socio-economic area, with few professionals, little industry, low salaries, few employment opportunities and many small unconnected communities. Levels of attainment were low and boys' literacy rates were unimpressive. Educationally, there were few positive role models and aspirations were generally low.

These circumstances meant that teachers had become the main role models for students. Consequently, the school had the task of bringing in as many role models as possible and providing new opportunities. These included providing activities such as tours, trips, interchanges, visiting experts and artists in residence. The world had to be brought to the school. The leadership team had to demonstrate a commitment to bringing people in and expanding the world of those in their school community, to increase their aspirations and achievement. Multicultural intervention and input was needed, which in turn required building networks and seizing opportunities. The teachers had to possess and practice the same attitudes and goals of the school leadership team. Furthermore, in order to boost the self-esteem of the school community, the head had to devise strategies to convince the community of the importance of qualifications and staying at school.

The highest achievers at this school completed their homework regularly. This knowledge was the foundation of the head's commitment to devising a homework policy, which was being formulated at the time of the interview. As there was no culture of study at home, traditional approaches to enforcing homework, such as detentions, had been used along with the offer of support in the form of after-school study facilities. This support had not been well utilised. This was viewed as a long-term issue, requiring patience and persistence. The slow pace of life in the community also had a great impact, demonstrated in the difficulties with reaching and engaging with parents.

For another head, it was the religious make-up of her students that was the most significant issue, affecting the whole curriculum, student behaviour, the preferred language and religious backgrounds of staff.

The fourth English headteacher saw the specific physical context of her school as the main issue in this regard.

The Tasmanian principals were also very clear about the importance of context to them and all acknowledged the significant impact of the school context on their leadership approaches. Two Tasmanian principals believed that the school's context was more critical for staff than students.

The principal explained that it was extremely important for leadership within the school to recognise the framework of dual stress that the staff works under.

Another Tasmanian principal reported that in her school, attainment levels were high, largely thanks to her highly experienced staff. However, the problem for her was a lack of innovation by staff.

Similarly, two other Tasmanian principals spoke of how their personal context impacted on their current attitudes and approaches.

In each situation, the principals adopted different strategies to support the development of the professional learning community. For instance, the small size of one school helped the principal in her strong desire to develop whole-school programmes and approaches. The aim was to prevent "sectionalising" of the school, as had previously been the case, and to provide a strong degree of connectedness and whole-school spirit. The approach of "one in, all in" was adopted. She formed teams within her school and had a focus on collaborative practices for staff learning and professional development. The supportive parent community was always included in developments and programmes, and both afternoon and evening sessions were offered to cater for the large working parent body.

For another Tasmanian principal, the aim was to improve the local community's contribution to his school. Its tradition of vocational education meant that it also had a

strong sense of its responsibility to the broader population and a basis upon which to build. Methods included:

- working with the university in the area of joint professional development of graduate attributes and staff employability frameworks
- offering master classes at the college by university staff
- enabling all staff to be out of the college for a day to work in industry

In another Tasmanian context, the principal, who was committed to understanding and considering the highly valued traditions of the school when planning approaches and strategies, put up old shields and photos of the school when she was first appointed. Initially she made loud statements about having a plan and wanting to learn from the community and develop strategies together. Strong messages about her commitment were extended to all school groups.

Advice for a new headteacher

The most repeated advice from English headteachers related to **knowing your values** and aims, and **having a plan**. One recommended that school leaders have clear in their mind their directions, aims, values and non-negotiable areas. Another stated that the development of a mission statement with key principles and actions was essential; a developmental plan was also needed to clarify the strategies to which the school was committed. Using benchmark data to help develop this vision was viewed as good practice. Correspondingly, a headteacher described the vision as a picture of what you are aiming for and emphasised its importance.

Many of the English headteachers highlighted the importance of getting to know your people, looking after them, paying close attention to **the emotional intelligence** of staff and placing family in an area of high priority. One headteacher stated that she firmly believed that family comes before work and declared that she puts this into practice both personally and for others. In another instance, a headteacher suggested paying particular attention to the emotional intelligence of every individual as well as developing an understanding of your own. He stressed that we should not forget that it was people we were talking about and that we needed to be aware of their stresses and strains.

Another school leader advocated getting to know people and always paying attention to personal issues. It was suggested that the new principal should **consult** at length with all staff about their perceived strengths and weaknesses of the school as well as their personal priorities.

Advice closely related to us was the need to be a **good listener**. One English headteacher deemed this crucial and said that it was always valuable to keep in touch with parents and that meetings with them need to be open. Similarly, links with local employers and mentors should always be sustained and strengthened; **getting to know your community** is key. This point was repeated by many headteachers, who also complimented the advice with a suggestion of learning to ask **the right questions**. One headteacher was stated that it was essential to be a good listener and to learn to assist people in personal reflection if they were to grow as educators. Knowing the right questions to ask was described as a method of achieving this.

Three headteachers spoke of the value of establishing and working with a **mentor**. In one instance, it was strongly recommended that newcomers get advice from two mentors. It was suggested that one should be another headteacher and the other a business mentor, to assist with “thinking outside the box” and to provide a different stock of expertise. One head expected all staff to have a mentor and believed that in a small school (as hers was) it was unhealthy not to have outside assistance and

input. Consequently, many of her teachers had peers in other places that help them professionally. This had brought some new partnerships into the school. In other interviews, it was suggested that a new headteacher shadow an existing head and that effort is made to find someone supportive whom you trust.

One English head outlined the invaluable support she received from a consultant who had been assisting regularly in an advisory/consultancy role for two years. The context of her school was unfamiliar to the consultant but this was considered to be a bonus. He had an educational background with particular expertise in middle management and had offered very sound advice. He asked probing questions, which assisted the head in further understanding her role and how to achieve her aims. He had also worked with the leadership team of the school.

Repeatedly, I received the advice of frequently building **praise and celebration** into practice. “Celebrating the positives” was one head’s description. Another was “giving lots of pats on the back”, even for little things.

On a number of occasions, English headteachers spoke of the importance of having good systems in place and **solid organisational structures** so that staff and students can be well supported in schools.

Other advice offered by English headteachers included:

- encouraging staff to get out and about, and learn that ‘the grass is not always greener’ in other schools
- enabling sharing on return
- operating in a consistent and persistent manner
- starting from where people were
- not altering everything to begin with
- being patient and proceeding at a pace all could cope with
- being your own person
- being prepared for your leadership position to be a developing role
- networking, spending time with other headteachers and using their expertise
- keeping grounded with children, know what they are doing and celebrating their achievements
- getting support of the Chair of Governors and all the governors
- being positive and optimistic at all times

All four Tasmanian principals gave me advice about new headship that fell into the category of relationships and having **good interpersonal skills**. Put simply, one principal suggested working on developing good relationships and elaborated by suggesting that a principal must be approachable, a good listener, be able to have fun and be sufficiently relaxed for people not to tiptoe around them. In this area, another principal touched on the importance of being **loyal** to the school and the community. As an example, the principal said they would never ‘talk down’ any student, staff member or the community at large to another audience, and encouraged others to adopt the same approach. He talked a lot about caring for staff, identifying that there will be differences of view, and suggesting resolution of these matters together. He suggested that enjoyment of what you do is shown through laughter and having fun together. To achieve this, he said, it is necessary to go out of your way to talk meaningfully to staff, asking questions, and getting to know things such as their personal priorities, the state of their health and future aspirations.

Another school leader believed that there were benefits in relying on your people skills, knowing the personalities within your school and developing **trust, honesty and loyalty**. This involved making it clear that family came first, hence developing

the goodwill of staff. Similarly, another principal stressed the benefits of adopting humility, relaxing enough to observe others and not presenting yourself as the “super leader”, rather aiming to walk forward with your staff and knowing people sufficiently to have an awareness of their limits. He believed that talking to every staff member individually allowed leaders to form a sense of their place in the learning community and that it was equally important to talk with students and parents. He also stressed that school leaders should be accessible to everyone. Hence his day was spent mostly in conversation – with students, staff, parents and community members and lots of that conversation is actually listening or asking questions and finding out what needs to happen to make things work better.

All but one principal spoke of the importance of recognising the particular **talents and interests** of staff and cultivating them. They believed that encouragement and support has direct benefits for students and that personal interest adds much to the sense of communal goodwill among staff. Celebrating successes and achievements of staff and the school was one of the most important things. One principal advocated the importance of looking for every opportunity to acknowledge the work of others.

Another key thread of the Tasmanian interviews was **selecting staff wisely**; looking for leading lights and for people with a strong values framework, who care about young people and see themselves as team members contributing to the wellbeing of the school community. Less important are subject disciplines and organisational or behaviour management skills, as these can be acquired through professional learning. One principal developed this idea further by recommending that school leaders look out for and nurture people who are leading lights, not only on staff but in the community as well. Another piece of advice was being aware that some people make a bigger difference than others to the education of students and, hence, investment in them is to be encouraged.

Two Tasmanian principals recommended that every effort be made to **empower all**, not just the teachers but the wider community, so that everyone learns together. Stakeholders needed to feel that they could have a say, that their voice would be heard and that they can contribute to agenda development within the school. Another suggestion was broadening the base of knowledge and understanding what happens in the school and getting to know why it happens. Everyone should be an advocate of the school and those in it; everyone should feel that they are in the loop, as exclusion breeds resentment.

A number of Tasmanian school leaders said it was important to value **flexibility and diversity**. Their common message was that everyone benefited from respecting the needs of each individual, which ensured flexibility in the school.

The importance of the principal modelling a **personal commitment to learning**, as well as a learning culture for staff was raised on a number of occasions. This was seen as part of the philosophy of constant improvement and a vital ingredient for organisational growth and a desirable lifelong commitment. Encouraging ambition among the staff and aiming to make them the most coveted group in the profession was articulated by one principal.

Providing opportunities for **leadership through promotions** and in particular roles in the school, district or department was also important. This was seen as a wonderful way of recognising their worth. Other examples of demonstrating behaviours to the community included accepting and embracing challenges and making your expectations clear by your own actions.

On two occasions, Tasmanian school principals spoke of the importance of **identifying areas for improvement** to make expectations and standards very clear. They proposed that the non-negotiable aspects of your school should be evident; that you remain true to your own ideals as a leader and clearly state your standards and expectations.

Other advice offered by Tasmanian headteachers included

- having the support of your district office staff, asking questions whenever unsure
- not taking hasty decisions and aiming for well-considered approaches to difficult issues
- observing what was happening in classrooms
- not seeing non-attendance of parents as lack of interest
- every so often, remind yourself to slow down
- deciding and accepting what you cannot do

Contribution of attendance and participation in workshop

This fifth and final question was asked to English headteachers only.

All English heads interviewed were positive about their involvement in this workshop. In particular, headteachers were impressed with the opportunity to learn from each other, create networks for support and share ideas that the workshop presented.

One head spoke highly of the personal challenge and provision of valuable networking opportunities that the workshop provided. She would have liked longer to hear others tell their story as she felt that she was with kindred spirits.

Another head was particularly impressed with the workshop and the ideas she gained through discussion with colleagues. The workshop reinforced the need for her learning community to become a priority again and reminded her just how important this is.

In another instance, it was reported that heads got a real buzz from learning from others at the workshop. The head stated that reflective time is needed now to make decisions about how to bring the information back to his school and felt that longer conversations are needed, particularly with schools in the same context. He described the gains as significant, especially on a personal level.

Having time with kindred spirits was stated as a real benefit by another headteacher. The most positive aspects of the workshop were that it provided an affirmation for leaders that there are other school leaders who have the same feelings and attitudes about effective professional learning communities — and that it enabled sharing and networking. This is most likely due to the fact that they were all willing to be involved in the programme and they were trying to achieve the same goals. Collectively, they have a focus on learning. They realise that networking is the way of the future and that fighting in your own corner is not the path to developing a bigger picture. As the geographical area of her school does not have a university, it has no links with tertiary educational institutions. There are no contacts with other professional educators and there is no culture of educational reading amongst the teachers. For example, the headteacher spoke about how wonderful it was to meet people whose work she has read, through the workshop.

For another headteacher, the workshop (and the project) facilitated professional development and helped establish new networks. Furthermore, it was a great opportunity to learn from other people's good practice and share good ideas.

Another view was that the greatest benefit of involvement in the project came from its ability to raise participants' self-esteem. Similarly, attendance at the workshop provided another headteacher with a reassurance of their achievements and progress. It promoted a positive feeling as others were taking her "small school" seriously. The workshop was an opportunity for her to fly the flag for her school. She was particularly proud to be able to do this as she now knows that her small community can stand with larger organisations. It also provided an opportunity to devise more strategies for getting even better at what they do.

Similarities and differences

The interviews conducted illustrate the commitment of these English and Tasmanian headteachers to developing a team approach, to the inclusion of all community members in their decision-making and to working together to develop whole-school approaches to school improvement. There are many areas of similarity and few differences, where beliefs and practices varied.

As was the case at the EPLC workshop, all 10 leaders emphasised the importance of developing a greater understanding of their own and their staff's emotional needs. It was evident that school leaders must show concern for the whole person and, to do this, have finely tuned interpersonal skills. Developing and maintaining positive relationships was seen as a priority by all school leaders. The fact that including relationships was raised in the discussion of all five questions highlighted the emphasis that both the English and Tasmanian leaders placed on the development of this essential, complex and highly valued personal skill.

Most of the leaders described themselves as reflective practitioners who also wanted their staff members to develop skills of evaluating and reflecting. Being able to ask the right questions at the right time was also seen as a valuable leadership skill.

A number of English headteachers described their use of a coach to bring about individual and school improvement and better outcomes for students. A strong message from "the advice offered to a newcomer and suggestions for early success" was the recommendation of English headteachers that staff work with a coach. This recommendation was the most obvious difference between the Tasmanian and English headteachers to emerge from the interviews.

Many spoke of the value of establishing a mentor both personally and for their staff members. Two headteachers spoke of the positive outcomes of meeting a coach regularly who worked in an ongoing consultancy role. In this area, the impact of NCSL's work on consultant leadership and an increasing trend towards using coaches in England was evident. The same advocacy and practice of this role was not articulated by the Tasmanian principals and is not currently a feature of the Tasmanian education system.

The headteachers in both countries advocated the benefits of having a whole school vision. A number of the English headteachers highlighted the significance of having a vision that ensured that the school context and its past experiences are adequately and accurately accounted for, and considered in those plans.

Another similarity expressed by all headteachers was the strong commitment to distributing leadership, with opportunities being available to any member of the staff, not just those in formal leadership positions. The discussions focused on the positive aspects of this practice, with significantly less discussion on the negatives. An English and a Tasmanian headteacher noted that commitment in this area could not yet be put into practice because greater staff collaboration and development were required. It is interesting to note that they both described their school context as extremely challenging.

The interviews with headteachers in both countries highlighted the view that, to achieve the best student outcomes, it was crucial for headteachers to know at first the plans and aspirations of their staff members. This in turn required headteachers to possess fine interpersonal skills and to care for their staff. Again, these two areas were strong recurring themes throughout the interviews of both countries.

Practically all heads highlighted the crucial impact of context on the characteristics of the professional learning communities in their schools. The overall view was that context could not simply be ignored. It was also obvious that as the school context became more challenging and complex, the more far-reaching its influence on their approach to leadership of their professional learning community. For example, in one English school, context was not described as challenging or requiring too much consideration and consequently other more significant priorities were discussed during the interview.

One clear difference in the views of the heads in the two different countries was the strong impact of governing bodies in English schools, and the support and assistance these can provide when effective. The governing body featured as an area requiring particular attention and the development of positive relationships. In comparison, Tasmanian principals did not emphasise their importance.

The English responses to the question about how the workshop contributed to their understanding of effective professional communities were very positive. They highlighted the need for leaders to work together, to learn from each other and to have reflective time away from their school to reaffirm their priorities. The responses also confirmed how easy it is to take things for granted and that what may seem a small outcome for one school can be so significant for another, due to its different context. For example, a number of headteachers explained that their schools considered their involvement in the project as an opportunity to raise the school profile and staff self-esteem.

Lessons from my visit to the UK that will influence me in my principalship

There are five key lessons I will carry forward with me from my visit to England as I work to create, develop and sustain an effective professional learning community in my Tasmanian school.

The importance of a shared vision and a focus on learning and teaching

Having a vision and educational goals that are shared by the school community is an essential foundation for school change, improvement and success.

A shared vision enables a school to take charge of change. However, it is crucial that the school's emphasis is on learning and teaching if the achievement levels of students are to be raised. With shared goals centred on teaching and learning, the whole school is driven forward.

Teachers need to have high expectations of their students. The curriculum must link to the goals of the school and a variety of teaching and monitoring strategies need to be implemented.

The school must encourage teachers to study and update teaching skills and strategies. Staff development should be a high priority. With these things in place, classroom improvement will increasingly become a fundamental motivator for whole-school improvement.

Leaders must concentrate on learning to build the appropriate focus of an effective professional learning community. Once established, strategies and ongoing commitment are required for it to be maintained. Learning-centred leadership is highly purposeful and requires the headteacher to understand the learning needs of the school, while becoming actively involved in the work of the teachers and the progress of the students. Whilst the role of the head teacher is extremely important, it must be remembered that they cannot possibly fulfil all of the school's needs for learning-oriented leadership. Learning must be the focus for all leaders in the school.

All leaders — and head teachers in particular — need a large knowledge base about learning and teaching to successfully lead and manage change, motivate and manage people and design and align systems, processes and resources. (Hill, 2001)

The importance of teams

Teamwork in schools needs to be fully supported and promoted because it demonstrates a commitment to shared leadership and collaboration. Teams provide a method of organising a school community and creating job enlargement and job rotation. Teams potentially offer more active involvement in higher level decision-making, supporting the sharing of complex and demanding school management tasks. They also help teachers to improve classroom outputs (Wallace and Hall, 1994).

Team meetings can highly effective learning opportunities where members develop expertise in how to work collaboratively.

Reviewing the interviews and literature highlighted many positive aspects of teams within schools. In particular, a school with effective teams challenges the notion that leadership is the exclusive domain of those in formal leadership positions and supports greater autonomy and broader contributions from across the whole school community.

The importance of reflection in order to be a good practitioner

Reflecting critically on one's own practice provides a basis for self-improvement. When encouraged more widely across the whole school, it builds expertise and capacity, generating new knowledge and direction. The school leaders interviewed outlined their commitment to the using various reflective practices and used and modelled the programme itself as a mirror to reflect on their school practices.

Teacher reflection is primarily a personal experience based on impressions. However, thorough and effective monitoring of pupil development via data and student feedback can also be very powerful reflection devices that form a strong basis for improvement. Michael Fullan (2001) suggests that deeper reflection requires other perspectives as well as our own work and puts forward options such as team teaching, classroom observation, performance appraisal, collaborative planning, teacher support groups or professional dialogue. He also suggests that we review the purposes and principles that underpin our classroom judgments and the ethics and principles of our actions.

Kruse, Seashore Louis and Bryk (1995) also emphasise the power and value of reflection:

In the end, reflection becomes a form of individual activity and social interaction, carried on among all members of the school community to create joint understandings related to students, learning and pedagogical practice.

The importance of context

Each school's context is unique. It informs the ways in which the school community views itself and its approach to learning. Factors influencing this context include the specific location of the school, the nature of the community it serves, the nature of its students, and the backgrounds of the staff and teachers who work there. Leaders must know their own and their school's context intimately.

What works in one context may lack relevance in another. As each school's context is different, so must be the approach taken to effect broader school improvement. It is not possible simply to devise a blueprint for all schools (Stoll & Fink, 1996; Hopkins, 2001). Furthermore it is increasingly being realised that sustainable improvement needs to come from within the school community, rather than it being externally mandated (Barth, 1990). A school working as an effective professional learning community can identify both its own specific needs and challenges for improvement and the particular approaches most suited to addressing these.

Bibliography

Barth, R and Guest, L, 1990, *Improving Schools from Within: Teachers, Parents and Principals Can Make a Difference*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass

Darling-Hammond, D and Sykes, G (eds), 1999, *Teaching for the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass

Fullan, M G, 1991, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, London, Cassell

Fullan, M, 2001, *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (3rd edn), New York and London, Teachers College Press and Routledge Falmer

Fullan, M G and Hargreaves, A, 1992, *What's Worth Fighting For in Your School?* Buckingham, Open University Press

Gronn, P 2003, *The New Work of Educational Leaders: Changing Leadership Practice in an Era of School Reform*, London, Paul Chapman

Hall, V, 2002, *From team work to teamwork in education*, Leithwood, K and Hallinger, P (eds), *Second International Handbook of Educational Leadership and administration*, Part Two, Norwell, Kluwer

Hill, P, March 2001, *What Principals Need to Know About Teaching and Learning*, IARTV Seminar Series No. 101, Victoria

Hopkins, D, 2001, *School Improvement for Real*, London, Routledge Falmer

Leithwood, K and Hallinger, P (eds), 2002, *Second International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Administration*, Dordrecht, Kluwer

Louis, K S, Kruse, S D and Associates, 1995, *Professionalism and Community: Perspectives on Reforming Urban Schools*, Thousand Oaks, Corwin Press

Munro, J, 2002, *Leading Learning Communities*. IARTV Seminar Series No.119, Victoria

Stoll, L and Fink, D, 1996, *Changing Our schools: Linking School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, Buckingham, Open University Press

Stoll, L, Fink, D and Earl, L, 2003, *It's About Learning (And It's About Time)*, London, Routledge Falmer

Wallace, M and Hall, V, 1994, *Inside the SMT: Team Approaches to Secondary School Management*, London, Paul Chapman