Chapter 12
Implications for Approaches to Teacher Learning

Abstract This chapter explores the implications of this type of professional learning for sectors and schools. The knowledge that teachers develop about their professional practice could be used by schools to shape and guide effective school-based leadership; however, there appears to be little opportunity for such application to occur at the school level – or more widely beyond programme cohorts. As such, this situation raises important considerations about what it might mean to value teachers as professionals in ways that recognise and meaningfully employ their developing professional knowledge and expertise.

Introduction

This chapter explores the implications for education systems, sectors and schools when developing understandings of teacher professional learning. The *LSiS* programme provided insights about leadership which teachers developed as a result of their experiences in this programme. The knowledge that participants developed could have been used by schools to shape and guide effective school-based leadership; however, there seemed to be little opportunity for that to occur at the school level – or more widely beyond the *LSiS* cohort. As the learning in this programme focused less on the action of teaching and more on understanding the professional thinking and principles which underpinned participants' professional action, the documented learning outcomes challenge school preparedness to do something as a consequence of supporting teachers' developing expertise. As such, it raises important considerations about what it might mean to value teachers as professionals in ways that recognise and meaningfully employs their developing professional knowledge and expertise.

Shifting Expectations

Changing the intention of teacher professional learning did not always fit with existing mindsets and experiences about what professional learning should entail. Previous chapters have indicated that some teachers experienced difficulty

undertaking new roles as active learners. It was also difficult for some participants to find opportunities to apply their new understandings in their school context. It seemed that, in some instances, schools were not prepared to 'make room' for the expertise teachers were developing. It appeared that schools perceived that professional learning, because of its personal nature, had no immediate application or use in terms of school improvement. Therefore, the biggest challenge experienced in personalising teacher learning appeared to be in effectively positioning the knowledge participants were developing within their school context to enhance professional practice. Limited opportunities were provided for the programme participants to articulate and share their learning with others in their school setting or use their knowledge to reshape structures and/or practices in ways that might enhance their given workplace context. Learning about professional thinking was not perceived as being of value to improving school operations.

Valuing Different Learning Outcomes

In the *LSiS* programme, teachers developed shared understandings about the aspects of practice they determined as important for effective school leadership in the area of science education. Their thinking culminated on the final day of the programme with participants producing a list of attributes they considered to be the most important for effective educational leadership. (The list was extensive and the attributes are listed in Table 12.1 to demonstrate the depth of thinking.)

Following the activity that led to the list of attributes (Table 12.1), participants then completed a 3, 2, 1 activity[1] to determine the three most important attributes derived of the list. The three principles of leadership voted as most important by the cohort were:

1. Building relationships (overwhelmingly the most valued principle)
2. Leading by example – enthusiasm/passion/taking responsible risks (extremely highly valued)
3. Big picture clear vision (a wider spread of support)

There is no doubt that the attributes of effective leaders (Table 12.1) listed by teachers in the LSiS programme illustrate some highly sophisticated knowledge about teaching and leadership. Schools could have effectively used these insights to review, reshape and guide effective school-based actions around leadership. However, teachers were continually faced with little opportunity to apply their thinking at the school level let alone more widely beyond the *LSiS* programme.

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[1] The 3, 2, 1 activity was a simple sorting strategy to identify the most valued principles across the cohort. Each participant was required to select from the group list the three principles they believed to be the most important for effective leadership. Each participant then had to rank these principles from 1 to 3 where 1 = most important. Each participant then shared his or her top response and another list was created.

Table 12.1 List of attributes of effective school leadership

Attributes of effective leaders
Builds relationships
Sees challenges as ways to develop leadership skills
Nurtures leadership skills in others, creating opportunities for others to lead
Leads by example – demonstrates enthusiasm and passion and takes responsible risks
Is true to personal priorities and values
Knows how to keep redefining success
Practices critical reflection – reflecting on needs and values of the members of the team
Challenges accepted thinking
Sets clear goals
Demonstrates perseverance
Is willing to see a need to act
Asks appropriate questions
Listens to what is said and not said and provides constructive feedback to empower other people
Is dynamic and always changing
Sees the vision and the importance of the subject and/or project
Maintains a big picture and clear vision
Finds out what motivates
Places an importance on identifying and celebrating success
Is creative and finds alternative approaches
Maintains momentum
Is flexible
Has credibility
Demonstrates an awareness of existing cultures and how this relates to future direction (e.g. teaches voice/leaders' voice)
Emphasises the value of working together (teamwork)
Identifies competing priorities
Knows him/herself and uses this knowledge to seek out support and opportunities to debrief (e.g. mentor/critical friend)

The problem of applying their learning outcomes within their school context was a general concern shared by participants and was not unique to individual schools but evident as a cultural issue across the sector. (It could perhaps be argued that it is representative of an accepted mindset about the expected outcomes of in-service education.)

The lack of school-based opportunities for change following on from the *LSiS* programme may well have provided little motivation for persisting with what was a different and sometimes difficult learning process. What would participants do as a consequence of their professional learning?

As previously noted, at times, Anna found the experience of self-directed professional learning challenging. In her school, she was already recognised as a successful leader, and at no time were links made between the ideas and experiences she was undertaking in the programme and opportunities for school-based change. In reality that meant there was little incentive for her to engage in ways which required

her to critically question her practice beyond the programme. As a consequence, a tension emerged between programme commitment and school expectations and responsibilities. While she worked to produce her digital story, she was absent for several sessions in the programme citing school-based demands as a reason for non-attendance.

The disconnection between school-based expectations and programme learning was certainly also an issue for Megan who struggled with owning and determining the worth and application of personal learning. The action that Megan undertook as a direct result of her learning and her action plan was to develop and implement a science programme designed specifically to cater for disengaged year 10 students. While the programme she developed proved a huge success, being oversubscribed in the following year, the school did not continue with the programme as it did not 'fit within existing programme structures'. That was a frustrating, and at times unrewarding, experience for Megan as both a learner and a school science leader.

The following entry in my facilitator journal indicates how I came to recognise the disconnection between the programme and schools. Even as early as the end of the first two sessions, the disconnection between the intention of personalised learning and the challenges raised was emerging as an issue in my mind:

> 7th December 2009
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>   This then raises another issue, how effective can a professional learning experience be which aims at building personal capacity for learning, in this case about leadership, when teachers have already established certain roles and relationships in a school and these then become part of the overall culture of that school. These behaviours and perceptions are hard to break and while the teacher may be willing to change and step outside the perception which defines them, others may not be eager to allow them to change because the implications are that they may also be required to see themselves in a different light. So does self-awareness facilitate or frustrate change? (Data Source: Facilitators Journal, p. 4)

These observations (quote above) raise questions about the type of support necessary to ensure that teacher learning is meaningful and valued and understood as a school's investment in building professional capital. Schools could do well to reassess the expectations that presently frame in-service teacher education.

It appears that schools face difficulties when considering how to embed in-service education programmes, and the learning that results, within school structures or operational approaches. Such programmes remain outside the day-to-day approaches to teaching and learning. Positioning teacher learning as an extra or as a set of 'boxes' to be 'ticked off' fails to capitalise on the value-added nature of teacher learning.

To support and further develop teacher professional knowledge and expertise, education systems and sectors could do well to seek to play a more active role in promoting teacher learning by positioning teachers as educational leaders both within schools and across the sector as a whole. Professional learning should be such that it encourages teachers to generate knowledge that contributes to a wider discourse in education; the resultant knowledge therefore needs to be valued, accorded status and somehow rewarded. A simple yet achievable model for so doing is hypothesised in Fig. 12.1 which is designed to draw attention to the need to
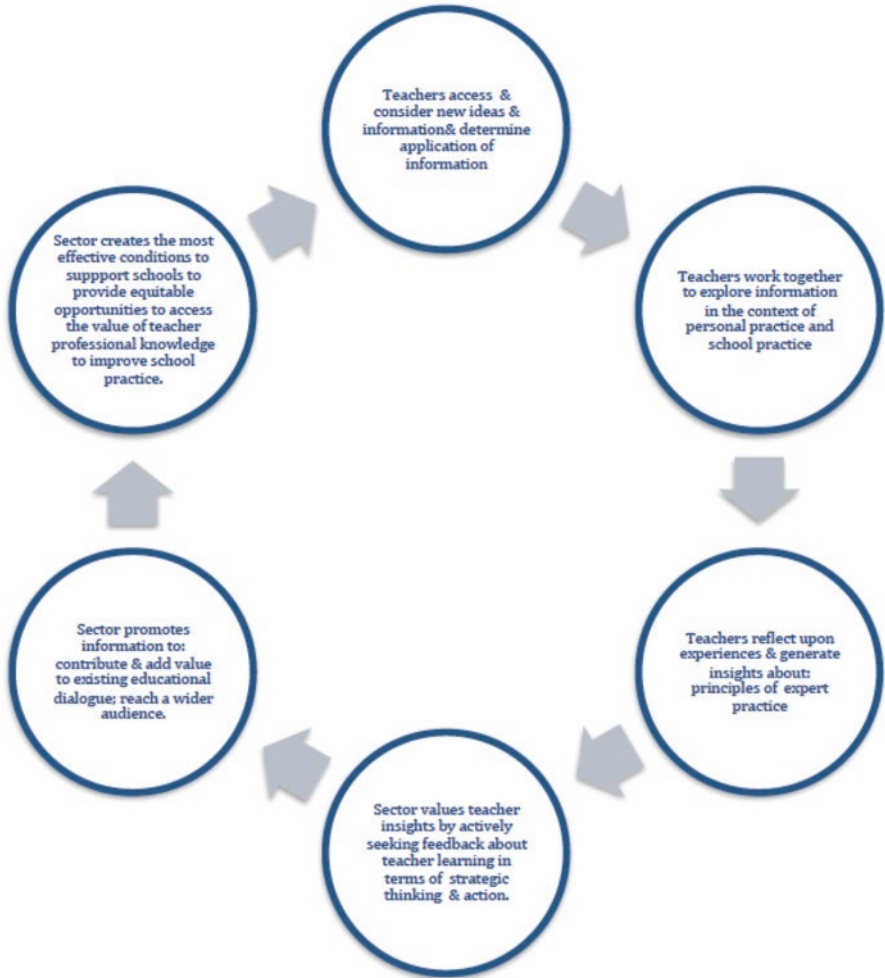
Fig. 12.1 The roles and responsibilities supporting teacher professional learning

provide opportunities for teachers to share their learning with a wider audience, thereby contributing to a wider educational discourse.

Chapter Summary

Education systems, sectors and schools have an obligation and responsibility to create conditions that acknowledge the expert knowledge teachers develop as a result of self-directed professional learning. Opportunities need to be provided that allow teachers themselves to value their personal professional knowledge, 'own' their

learning and feel comfortable enough to share their thinking and professional expertise.

The implications of changing both the purpose and the intention of in-service teacher education in line with the approaches inherent in the nature of professional learning as considered in this study cannot be understated for schools and the education sector more broadly. Professional learning needs to be less about being a 'programme' and more about becoming a process of learning. The school context needs to become meaningfully connected and interwoven with professional learning in order to encourage and enable teachers to grasp the importance of individual learning but also to seek to influence the nature of collective professional growth through knowledge development.