

## Chapter 7

# A New Way of Operating: Emerging Challenges for Traditional Practice

**Abstract** A number of tensions and challenges emerged for all stakeholders as they attempted to work differently in this professional learning experience. This chapter builds on the information in the previous chapters in this section and identifies and explores the nature of the challenges that emerged for the sector, the teacher participants and the facilitators. The chapter discusses how the operational features that actively positioned teachers as self-directed learners placed different responsibilities on teachers as learners and support personnel, requiring them to redefine their values, expectations and ultimately their behaviours in professional learning.

### Introduction

The previous chapters in this section provided a description of the intention and impact of specific operational features in the *LSiS* programme. This chapter attempts to identify and explore the nature of the challenges that emerged when these features were implemented within the operational space that it could be suggested, traditionally define teacher in-service education. Generally unquestioned modes of operation frame traditional teacher in-service programmes such as practice follows a top down model; focus is on teacher attainment of predetermined learning products; and the overall intention is to measure success based on improved student learning outcomes.

The operational features that defined the *LSiS* programme moved away from the traditional model and instead aimed to support teacher self-directed learning. In so doing, different responsibilities were placed on the teachers and support personnel requiring them to redefine their values, expectations and ultimately their behaviours in this professional learning programme. Inevitably tensions arose on a number of levels: the sector, the teacher participants and the facilitators. This chapter discusses these tensions and the challenges that emerged.

## Challenges at a Sector Level

Traditionally at the sector level, the value and success of in-service professional development programmes have been measured in terms of cost analysis, teacher outreach and student impact. An assumption appears to prevail that effective teacher PD programmes are those that deal with large numbers of teachers and achieve this wide outreach with minimal expenditure. If these outcomes are achieved, then it is assumed to have provided a quantifiable return for sector investment. Such assumptions tend to determine routine operation and as such created a significant challenge for the proposed operational programme features developed for the *LSiS* programme.

Under normal operating conditions, the *LSiS* programme would have been unlikely to have been approved as it required an intensive investment of money, time and professional expertise for a small cohort. By making an exception for this research project, the sector ensured that an unusually large financial investment, similar to that aligned with larger programmes, was maintained for a small cohort. The investment enabled the programme to create conditions whereby teachers themselves were effectively empowered as the key decision makers in their professional learning experience.

The flexible timing of the programme also challenged existing sector practices. While the programme developed across a 5-day format, the overall timeline was determined as the programme progressed, and the flexibility the approach required initially created conflicts in relation to 'usual sector planning procedures'. A requirement of sector PD protocols is that external PD programmes advise central office and schools of all session dates in advance of programme commencement. In so doing, it ensures the time allocated to each programme can be recorded for teacher registration purposes and also allow schools to receive advance notice of programme dates. Such a process assists with the organisation of replacement teachers to cover participants' absence from school. However, in this research project, the programme was initially advertised to schools with confirmation only of the dates of the first two days, and while it was explained that the dates of the following days would be announced, schools and teachers found the uncertainty around dates difficult to manage because of existing structured school routines. The unanticipated nature of the programme's timeline was a significant shift from accepted procedures, and while all participants were able to attend all programme days, the format was initially problematic for the sector and school-based administration processes.

Another challenge that emerged for both the programme and the sector was the identification of science leadership roles in school settings. Although the participating teachers were all undertaking positions of leadership in science within their schools, the selection process found that a position of school-based leadership, as it applied to science teaching and learning, was not consistently designated across all schools. In secondary settings, the role of 'science coordinator' reflected the types of responsibilities pertinent to the programme's intention of leading school-based change; however, not every secondary participant was undertaking such a role. Some teachers were year level coordinators who were in a position to work with

colleagues to rethink science teaching and learning at certain year levels. Primary (elementary) schools rarely designated a science coordinator role; instead the ‘teaching and learning coordinator’, ‘curriculum coordinator’ or again ‘level leader’ indicated a position within a school where responsibilities included leading planning discussions around teaching actions. The roles and responsibilities, the time allocations, the expectations of performance and the challenges and tensions each teacher experienced in relation to their role differed from school to school.

In this research project, the sector valued the nature and quality of the learning experience the *LSiS* programme provided. Project officers, located in the central office, worked to accommodate the challenges that alternative operational features created for programme implementation. By doing so, the sector demonstrated a shared value in terms of positioning teachers as decision makers about their own learning, their practice and, ultimately, change at the school level.

## Challenges for Teachers

In many programmes, facilitators pre-plan and control programme design. The assumption underpinning such a model is that the facilitator is best positioned, due to their recognised expertise, to determine what teachers need to learn and how that learning should occur. In this (common/traditional) scenario, teachers are ‘professionally developed’ through the work and ideas of programme designers and facilitators. The *LSiS* programme set about to reposition the notion of expertise and actively place the decisions about the focus of learning with the participating teachers.

Some of the greatest challenges to these changes emanated from the preconceived ideas teachers had about their role in professional learning. Teachers based their expectations on what they had previously experienced, and most teachers began by adopting a passive role as a learner, happy to place decisions about programme content firmly in the hands of the facilitator. Changing that scenario required teachers to be willing to undertake a new role that demanded more intellectual engagement. Such an expectation was sometimes met with uncertainty and resistance, as illustrated in the following transcript in which Joanne reflects on the challenges she faced as she attempted to understand and work differently through the *LSiS* professional learning experience.

Joanne: I remember saying to you, “What do you want? What do you want from me? Why are you giving me this accommodation? Why?” And I think we really get focused on that end product and even I will go, “Oh what do you want me to film? Do you want something sciencey?” It’s not enough for me to just go with the process even though I know that is the best way, that is a change of thinking because I keep thinking I have to do something really good or they’ll take my camera back off me or why are you giving me this accommodation? You want something from me and that is the way we’re conditioned isn’t it? But with the spacing of these programmes and with the thinking and with gradually introducing things, just one thing, yea I think it makes a difference. (Data Source: Interview 1, Joanne p. 4)

Data such as that from Joanne (above) suggests that, initially, teachers found it difficult to understand different approaches to professional learning because they did not see more traditional PD approaches as problematic in terms of their own learning. It could be argued that teachers are happy to continue the role they know and at times resist attempts by programmes to hand ownership of learning over to them. The challenges participants faced in developing new learning behaviours in the *LSiS* programme reflected the way their previous experiences had been ‘ingrained’ and led to enculturated ways of operating as ‘PD learners’.

It may well be fair to suggest that teachers are not typically encouraged to critically reflect on the features which frame professional learning programmes, and if so, it is understandable that for many the first challenge as decision makers is finding a reason to make decisions, i.e. a reason why they should think and work differently in professional learning.

*LSiS* created a new role for participants which required them to explicitly consider and accept that a new purpose for personal learning could be as advantageous to them as learning about the ‘what to do’ of teaching. Previously, professional development experiences typically provided practical ideas, resources and activities, that is, programmes maintained a strong focus on the technical aspects of teaching. In the *LSiS* programme, teachers were asked to focus their learning on the process of their professional practice, in particular, why they worked in certain ways and what informed their decisions. Through *LSiS*, professional learning was about enabling participants to undertake disciplined enquiry (Mason 2002) into their professional practice. As the data cited throughout this chapter consistently illustrates, teachers had to ‘live the experience’ to value the change these new features could deliver, not only in terms of their professional thinking and practice but also in terms of their self-esteem and confidence.

### ***Challenges for Facilitators***

Facilitators also bring their previous experiences and preconceived ideas about their role to bear on their practice, which inevitably impacts how they behave and interact with teachers as they work in professional learning programmes. Typically, PD frameworks can be interpreted as positioning facilitators as experts responsible for:

- helping teachers understand things they need to know and to become better at what they do;
- determining specific content – identifying a range of ideas they consider valuable for teachers to know more about and selecting the teaching strategies that will be most effective in helping teachers understand such ideas; and,
- controlling the learning – working within areas of content that they personally feel confident with and in which they feel they have developed a degree of recognised expertise.

Creating alternative conditions for facilitators, which allow them to be open and willing to change the nature of the relationships that underpin their role, is crucial to shifting from a PD to PL perspective. The facilitator needs to work collaboratively and cooperatively with teachers. While such a role is fundamental to teacher self-directed learning, undertaking a role which responds directly to the expressed needs of teacher participants is clearly difficult and unpredictable, and I was required, as facilitator, to effectively find strategies which dealt with my own uncertainty and corresponding teacher resistance.

Such a new facilitator role is a work in progress, and through the *LSiS* project, it has been conceptualised, developed and enacted across the life of the programme. There were no established guidelines to shape facilitator actions. Facilitator-teacher relationships based on equity and sharing to minimise ‘power positions’ became essential, and facilitator action had to evolve to nurture such trust and openness. The process required a time commitment to teacher learning beyond the face-to-face programme schedule and involvement in ongoing open communication and interaction. Finding the personal confidence, time and effective ways of working with teachers required commitment and persistence.

Maintaining teacher ownership was also problematic as the *LSiS* programme relied on appropriately accessing and responding to teacher thinking to inform programme design. An example of the difficulty this operational feature created for facilitator practice related to the need to source and implement a variety of activities to prompt teacher reflection throughout the programme.

In the *LSiS* programme, such strategies included 5 whys, lotus diagrams, listening to learn sheets and free talk. (Examples of 5 Whys and Listening to Learn sheets can be found in [Appendix 4](#).)

One of the challenges that emerged through this research was the intention to build teacher capacity to take ownership of their own professional learning and the facilitator’s need, as a researcher, to access teachers’ thinking to monitor views of, and responses to, practice. Therefore, it was recognised that this dilemma, i.e., seeking to access very personal reflections and insights into personal thinking and understanding while enmeshed in a pedagogical relationship, could potentially work against the very intention central to the programme and the research. The situation needed to be approached with respect, acknowledging teachers’ rights to operate safely without inducement or duress. Thus, after a reasonable amount of time had passed (i.e. 2 weeks) following the completion of the reflection activity, the teachers were contacted, and their permission was sought to share their responses.

## Chapter Summary

While teachers may expect that PL programmes provide outside expertise to address some of the situations they face in their teaching, this programme provided a very different learning experience. Rather than nurturing dependency, *LSiS* aimed to foster teacher autonomy and ownership of learning, requiring teachers to undertake

new responsibilities and become active learners. This new role presented challenges for many of the teacher participants, as it demanded a higher level of intellectual engagement than their previous PD experience. These expectations were sometimes met with uncertainty.

To provide the conditions needed to support such learning, alternative operational features were required which challenged many of the traditional approaches to programme design – including predetermined timeframes, expectations about learning outcomes and outreach. Practical sector support was needed and required a degree of flexibility not normally seen in programme design.

To enable teachers to work differently, the facilitator needed to develop a range of alternative skills and find strategies that effectively accessed teacher thinking. The facilitator had to find ways to deal with personal uncertainty and corresponding teacher resistance. That made for a challenging role as it was constantly evolving, being conceptualised, developed and enacted across the life of the programme. The programme operational features produced challenges on a number of levels yet all challenges produced new insights and fostered deeper understandings about how teacher self-directed teacher learning could be achieved within the present space of teacher in-service education.