

**Teachers as lifelong learners**  
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## **Introduction**

This paper draws on insights gained from the evaluation of the Curriculum Innovation Projects (CIPs) conducted over 2003–2004 (Boyd et al., 2005). The four secondary schools and the school cluster in the CIPs were offered two years of additional Ministry of Education funding to assist them to implement local solutions which addressed some of the challenges of today's educational environment. For teachers, the overarching goal of the CIPs was to develop learning communities. The aim of these communities was to provide support to teachers as they sourced more authentic learning contexts for students and developed practices that assisted students to become lifelong learners.

This paper explores the different ways the schools in the CIPs attempted to increase the lifelong learning orientation of teachers through developing communities among school staff or with other members of the wider education or business communities. It discusses the impact of these communities on teachers' sense of collegiality and their practice, and considers the complexities and challenges inherent in developing new forms of relationships and collaborations at the school level. This paper also comments on how, at the national level, the current ecology of schooling can support or inhibit the functioning of these communities.

## **Developing communities**

The CIPs were built on the premise that secondary students' learning experiences would be improved through the strengthening of teacher communities and the development of new collaborations. Accordingly, the forging of new types of working relationships among teachers and with members of the wider community was key to all the CIPs, but how this was enacted varied between schools.

### **Developing communities with other school staff**

All of the schools in this study had the development of professional learning communities with other school staff as one of their goals, and this was the main form of community development in the CIPs. The communities that developed could be between teachers and

their colleagues in the same department, their colleagues in different departments, or their colleagues at other schools. These communities were used as a vehicle to manage the change process at each school. School leaders considered that taking the focus of meetings away from administration and towards professional learning would assist in upskilling teachers in new pedagogies and interpretation of the curriculum, and would support the development of a more reflective staff culture that emphasised lifelong learning for teachers. Internationally the power of such communities to support school reform and to create a culture of continuous improvement is becoming increasingly documented (Hargreaves, 2002; Harris, 2002; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; Queensland State Education, 2000; Timperley, 2003).

### Developing communities with people outside school

Some of the schools developed communities that involved people from outside the school. These communities were between teachers and educators at tertiary institutions, scientists, or local employers. In particular, the senior science staff at one school developed close ties with the science staff at a local university.

## Features of the communities

The communities that developed had aspects in common and some points of difference. These are described below.

### Strong leadership

It is widely recognised that leadership is central to developing, nurturing, and sustaining change (Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Harris, 2002), and at CIP schools the initial support of the principal in providing pedagogical leadership and setting the direction for each community was key. The literature that discusses school change initiatives emphasises this type of professional and pedagogical leadership (rather than a managerialist approach) as a key element of successful school reforms (Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore, 1995; School of Education, The University of Queensland, 2001; Stoll & Fink, 1996).

One of the goals of some of the CIPs was to grow staff capability and most of the school leaders had devolved leadership responsibilities for setting up and maintaining the communities to senior and, sometimes, more junior teachers.

Leadership of each community was vital. The groups varied as to how leadership was organised. Most had a senior staff member, who also taught CIP students, facilitating meetings. Other schools used school or external facilitators who were not directly involved in teaching the CIP students. These leaders tended to use a collaborative style of leadership and were cognisant that different staff members were at different points in relating their practice to the vision for each CIP.

## Extra resourcing: Creating time to examine practice

The CIP grant provided schools with extra funding to step outside the norm and to experiment with ideas, and school principals strategically supported their innovators by allocating additional resources to the projects. Extra resourcing included time for ongoing team meetings, shared in-house or external professional development, or extra planning time. Organising release time rather than relief time was an important support for teachers as the CIPs had workload implications. Teachers' views varied as to whether they considered they had enough timetabled release time to plan and reflect, or enough sustained time to meet with their colleagues.

If, for reasons such as timetabling, workload, or staff turnover, the meeting system was discontinued, staff experienced their sense of community starting to break down.

Other forms of resourcing organised at some of the schools included juggling of the timetable to enable teachers to either meet together, team-teach, or take classes that allowed for sustained learning or visits outside school. Resourcing to support small class sizes also supported the aims of some of the projects.

## Developing a safe environment

Developing a safe trusting environment was a priority for project leaders—and many staff commented on how the emphasis placed on this in their teams, and how their team leader's collaborative style had supported a sense of team cohesion to develop. The importance of a high-trust or blame-free culture and a collective sense of responsibility are mentioned in the literature as prerequisites which provide an environment within which teachers can critically examine their practice (Fullan, 2005; Timperley & Parr, 2004). In 2003, teachers described the challenges they worked through as they developed new communities with their colleagues. Those who were deprivatising their practice tended to experience more initial discomfort. By the end of 2004 a strong sense of trust and collegiality was reported by most of those working within these teams. In some cases teachers who did not share the views of the team had left the projects or the schools.

## Focusing on improving practice through shared professional development, collaboration, reflection, or deprivatised practice

The communities were all orientated towards upskilling teachers and providing opportunities for ongoing professional learning. Shared professional development offered a starting point, a forum for discussion, and supported the development of cohesive groups.

The other activities teachers undertook in the communities varied. Collaborations to support curriculum enrichment were common. These included the planning of cross-curricula units, or findings ways in which the work of university researchers or local business people could be used to support students' learning.

Less common activities that occurred at one or two of the schools were forms of deprivatised practice such as team teaching, or discussions about students' achievement and the criteria used for assessment. At some schools staff used meeting times to discuss and reflect on their teaching strategies and share teaching resources. These activities can be located on a continuum of "risk" with those involving the most risk, such as deprivatised practice, being the least common. Those involving the least risk, such as shared professional development, were the most common.

### Knowledge of good practice pedagogy

In general the CIP aims of increasing the authenticity of learning experiences and creating an environment that supported students to develop lifelong learning skills necessitated a shift from a structured whole-class teaching approach towards student-centred individualised approaches. In some cases providing various types of support for teachers to shift their practice was an explicit focus of the community of which they were part. In other cases this focus was implicit rather than explicit. Russell (2003) notes that the sorts of practices which support students to become lifelong learners are those which:

- strengthen both teacher-student relationships and the challenge of learning;
- are based on the concept of learning as the students' construction of meaning;
- involve students in decision making about content, process, and assessment;
- use authentic tasks that require complex thought and allow for exploration;
- provide opportunities for students to develop social competencies; and
- cater to individual differences in interest, achievement, and learning styles.

Most of the CIP teachers were making changes in relation to some of the above practices. But interviews with teachers and students in the CIPs demonstrated that teachers were at many different stages in regard to their understanding of the need to change their practice, their knowledge of good practice, and the types of changes they were making. This variability was influenced by the amount of emphasis placed on pedagogy in each community, the support provided to teachers to change their practice, and by other factors such as teachers' personal beliefs about teaching and their prior access to professional development.

### An understanding of the alignment between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment

In some of the communities the interaction between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment had been considered. To support the alignment of curriculum and pedagogy, departments at some schools had decided to pare down curriculum coverage so students could engage in more sustained work. The need to refine the secondary school curriculum to give space to create environments that are conducive to the development of lifelong learning skills is mentioned in the literature (Bryce, Frigo, McKenzie, & Withers, 2000). In the CIP schools this process seemed easier to manage in smaller faculties or departments, or in situations in

which the whole department was involved in the CIP. It was more difficult to do at a whole-school level or by teachers who were operating in isolation from the rest of their department.

Other communities focused on curriculum enrichment but had not necessarily considered the interaction between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Consequently we noted a pattern for teachers to make changes to the learning experiences they offered students but not to consider the changes in pedagogy that might sit alongside these. One trend observed across schools was teachers offering more opportunity for students to engage in sustained projects. To support students as they completed these projects teachers shifted their role from an “instructor” to a “facilitator”, but did not necessarily provide students with enough scaffolding to support them to develop the self-managing skills necessary to function in this new environment.

## **The benefits and challenges of developing communities**

### **Benefits of developing communities with other school staff**

Although the communities that developed at each school varied considerably, overall a heightened sense of collegiality as a result of working together in teams was a key outcome of the CIPs for teachers. Teachers valued the resource sharing and professional learning that occurred, the discussions that were held about teacher practice and student behaviour and achievement, the breaking down of silos in departments or speciality areas, and the lessening of competition between schools that had occurred as a result. Teachers commented that being part of these communities had given them a licence to innovate and reinforced a sense that they were lifelong learners.

#### *Nurturing new leaders*

At the three schools which most emphasised lifelong learning for students, working within a community and focusing closely on their practice had, for some teachers, supported their development as “lead teachers”. These teachers reported they were increasing their use of student-centred pedagogies. The student data indicated that teachers tended to be located in one of two groups. One group contained the lead teachers and other teachers who taught in a constructivist manner, incorporating a range of student-centred practices into their repertoire. The second group contained teachers who tended to use more traditional teaching styles. At one school we were able to analyse the student questionnaire data between classes. This data clearly showed a trend for teachers to be in one of the two groups. Similarly, in Australia the *Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS)* data showed that some teachers consistently displayed high ratings across all the dimensions of productive pedagogies (School of Education, The University of Queensland, 2001).

Students mostly indicated strong preferences for the student-centred style of the lead teachers. The types of practices students described these teachers using aligned well with those

discussed in the literature about pedagogies that support lifelong learners (Bartlett, 2005; Russell, 2003; Weimer, 2002).

Organising and facilitating a community of teachers also supported some teachers to develop their facilitation and leadership abilities. In some cases this was a planned process and in others these new leaders emerged as a result of the new responsibilities and collaborations they were undertaking.

The lead teachers and facilitators and other staff commented that reflecting on their practice, taking risks, and changing their practice had made them more open to new ideas, strengthened their conception of themselves as lifelong learners, and given them a wider view of themselves as educators. Consequently, they were more willing to take on leadership roles in other aspects of school life or share their insights with their peers.

### Benefits of developing communities with people outside school

The new relationships teachers developed with those outside school enabled them to engage in professional dialogue with “experts” and gain access to recent research and developments in their subject area, and professional development in other areas such as ICT skills. This enhanced teachers’ views of themselves as lifelong learners and supported them to develop deeper knowledge of their subject area and new skills.

Working with people from outside school could provide opportunities for curriculum enrichment by supporting teachers to offer practical learning experiences that were relevant to students and allowed students access to equipment and experiences they were unable to have at school. Managing relationships and collaborations with people from outside the school environment also assisted in developing some staff’s leadership abilities.

### Challenges of developing communities

Teachers were excited by the potential of the new collaborations they were developing, especially when the value for student learning was obvious, but they had to manage the dilemmas that arose when people with different beliefs, expectations, and working habits started to collaborate. Teachers were not necessarily prepared for the increased interaction these communities entailed, and did not always feel confident to deal with each other or with people outside the school environment. Some found they had to spend additional time understanding the new people they were working with, finding a common ground and a common purpose, and developing an understanding about the dynamics of these new relationships.

Taking on a new leadership role such as a group facilitator necessitated that teachers step outside their comfort zone, and team leaders found they needed new skills to assist them to manage the social dynamics of the groups. Similarly, teachers who were working closely

together in the classroom found they had to negotiate with each other to reach consensus about their activities.

These schools were not alone in the challenges they faced in managing the dynamics of new communities. Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) discuss how they were ill-prepared to manage the social interactions that occurred when they brought together a group of teachers who would not normally work together. They comment on the inherent difficulties in finding common ground between people with divergent views on teaching and learning, especially when superficially, such divergences are not apparent. Similarly, Hargreaves (2002) suggests that conflict is a necessary aspect of professional learning communities.

On a more pragmatic level, organising time for groups of teachers to meet at school, or times and locations for external visits, required considerable co-ordination, time, and juggling of the timetable by teachers. In general, making and maintaining connections with groups outside school was most successful when the connections were arranged by a facilitator who had time specifically set aside for this purpose, or when the connections built on existing relationships.

## **Were these communities *learning* communities or professional communities?**

Teachers valued these interactions they had within the communities that were part of the CIPs for the support and professional development they gained. But were the groups of teachers in the CIPs a learning community or a professional team? In the literature, descriptions of the essence of learning communities vary. From a review of this literature, Timperley (2003) identifies that a professional learning community is one in which teachers are supported to update their knowledge and skills within the context of an organised school-wide system. She notes that the main characteristics of a strong learning community are:

- shared norms and values and collectively agreed on professional beliefs;
- a clear focus on student learning;
- processes that support teachers to engage in reflective dialogue in relation to student achievement;
- an emphasis on deprivatisation of practice (through some form of sharing such as discussion of information about progress or through observation of practice); and
- processes which support collaboration between teachers (for example joint planning or curriculum development).

Timperley and Parr (2004) make the distinction between a professional community and a professional *learning* community. Professional communities share ideas, work together, and provide support to each other. Professional *learning* communities are focused on raising student achievement and do so through learning conversations that focus on analysing and

discussing student achievement. They note that “evidence-based learning conversations are at the heart of professional *learning* communities” (Timperley & Parr, 2004, p. 127, emphasis added).

Some of the teacher groups that formed as part of the CIPs could be defined as professional learning communities. These were the groups that discussed student learning and students’ next steps or who were able to deprivatise their practice through observations of each other’s practice during team-teaching. Most groups tended to predominantly function as a professional community. These groups focused on areas such as: resource and expertise sharing; department, inter-school, or inter-agency goals; shared professional development and reading; or behaviour management. As noted before, this is a “lower risk” form of engagement.

There were three main reasons why many of the CIP communities did not function as a learning community of the sort described by Timperley and Parr (2004).

#### 1) Varied levels of understanding about the needs for shifts in practice

Some staff at the CIP schools made substantial moves over 2003–2004 to increase their use of student-centred practices. Others recognised the need to make this shift but did not seem to have made many inroads in this area or lacked examples for how this could be achieved in their subject area. Others were focused on curriculum enrichment and did not see a need to change their practice. This variability in teachers’ experiences in part reflected a lack of available support within some communities for teachers to recognise and develop the new skills required, and a lack of a clear emphasis on shifting practice in others.

Although the communities did not have all the supports in place to assist teachers to change their practice, those who were working within a community were better placed to make changes in comparison to the teachers in the CIPs who were working in isolation. Those in communities were able to see or hear about others’ teaching practice, the changes others were making, and how they managed these changes. Those who were working in isolation in their classrooms did not have this opportunity or support from their colleagues.

To be supported to make changes to their pedagogy, teachers needed to have a clear sense of the changes in practice they were working towards. Extra support, such as the opportunity to observe teachers who were more comfortable with student-centred pedagogies or additional team professional development in this area, could have been beneficial for these teachers. Some individually identified this need but found it hard to source professional development related to their particular curriculum area.

Teachers also needed an overview of how changes to curriculum potentially impacted on pedagogy and assessment. The framework for change at each school needed to make the interaction between these areas explicit if this was to happen. The developers of the New Basics initiative talk about the necessity of co-ordinating these three message systems



(Queensland State Education, 2000). If these connections were not transparent for CIP teachers they tended to not see a need to make changes to their practice.

## 2) A lack of alignment of national messages about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment

Stoll, MacBeath, and Mortimore (2001) and Russell (2003) talk about the need for deliberate national attempts to transform the “ecology” of schooling. One example of such a deliberate attempt is the New Basics initiative in Australia (Queensland Government, 2004). Without national coherence, teachers and schools are operating in isolation and lack influence over the structures that support traditional practices such as the organisation of secondary school timetables, curriculum areas, and qualifications. Russell (2003) suggests that without national support to assist secondary teachers to change their practices towards those which assist students to function in the knowledge age, it is likely that change will progress slowly. She notes that, among other areas, more models are needed of:

- direct teaching about thinking and learning;
- processes that involve students in deciding content, processes, and assessment; and
- tasks that enable the learning outcomes for the knowledge society to be used and assessed as curriculum goals.

An example of an influential aspect of the ecology of schooling is the current assessment regime in New Zealand secondary schools. The current form of assessment for qualifications impacted on CIP teachers’ ability to make changes to their practice. Current high-stakes assessments such as the NCEA, or practice examinations for NCEA, tend to focus on content knowledge rather than lifelong learning skills, and privilege summative assessment over formative assessment. Although CIP teachers were starting to develop new models for assessing lifelong learning skills, in general, this situation resulted in a lack of tools for assessing lifelong learning behaviours, and therefore a lack of ability to report to students and parents on the full range of skills and attributes students were acquiring through their formal schooling experiences. For CIP teachers this lack of assessment models also inhibited them from using evidence to adapt their practices and therefore functioning as a learning community.

## 3) The need for systems to support deprivatised practice

Most of the communities did not provide many opportunities for deprivatising practice, which also hindered their ability to function as a learning community. Those who were able to team-teach, or observe others, talked about the learning they experienced as a result. Although a number of teachers commented that they would have liked to be able to observe other teachers, be mentored, or spend more time working with their colleagues in classrooms, on the whole they did not get many opportunities to do this.

Deprivatised practice is supported in the literature as a key element in the development of a learning community (Harris, 2002; Louis et al., 1996; Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000; Timperley, 2003), but these practices, especially opportunities to observe other teachers, are not common in New Zealand secondary schools. In the national survey of secondary schools undertaken by NZCER in 2003, getting feedback from other teachers' observations and observing each other's teaching, were the lowest rated items in a question which examined aspects of collegial practice (Hipkins & Hodgen, 2004). Over one-third of teachers rated these two items as non-existent or poor, indicating that nationally many teachers do not have access to these opportunities. Mentoring approaches are becoming more common in New Zealand, particular for principals (Robertson, 1999), but these may not involve direct observation of practice.

Using the skills of the emerging lead teachers for observation or mentoring programmes could be one way for schools to deprivatise practice. This would also require a consideration of how to support teachers to feel comfortable with this more "risky" aspect of a learning community.

## **Summary: Providing varied types of support**

The findings from the CIP research indicated that although the communities that developed did not have all the features of a learning community, substantial benefits accrued for teachers from the types of professional communities that were formed. The findings showed that teachers who were part of communities found it easier to change their practice and embed change into the school system than those operating in isolation.

It is clear from this research that developing a learning community is a complex task and one that requires considerable thought to the purpose of the community, planning and resourcing that supports this purpose, and a consideration of how to best support teachers in this more risky environment. New Zealand studies that report successful outcomes for students stemming from the development of learning communities suggest that these communities have at least two structural characteristics in common: they have long periods of development (of at least 2-3 years); and are supported by initial external involvement by professional development facilitators (Timperley, 2003; Tuuta, Bradnam, Hynds, Higgins, & Broughton, 2004).

Other research also notes that a combination of in-school and external professional development is needed to build teacher capability (School of Education, The University of Queensland, 2001). This also appears to be the case for the CIP schools. The most common form of professional development in the CIPs was the in-house professional learning that was provided in the communities described in this paper. Most did not source ongoing external professional development to support the development of these communities. As noted by Timperley, Phillips, and Wiseman (2003) there is a danger that professional communities can

support traditional norms. The experiences of CIP teachers give some indication that without external input this could be likely to occur.

In general it appeared that at most of the schools there had been an under-estimation of the support teachers would require to change their practice. In particular, teachers could have benefited from focused professional development about how to provide students with increased autonomy over their learning, whilst also ensuring that appropriate scaffolds were in place to support students to develop self-regulating behaviours.

This under-estimation appeared to be related to a number of factors. One was a lack of consideration about how changes to curriculum impacted on pedagogy. Another was an assumption that these practices would be “caught” by teachers or that those within the school environment would be able to provide enough support to their colleagues. The cost of professional development (particularly in terms of teacher time for external courses or observation programmes) was another factor, as was the difficulty commented on by some teachers of sourcing good quality professional development which gave them concrete examples of practices related to their subject area. Another factor was teacher overload and that professional development surrounding the implementation of the NCEA took precedence over other activities.

These research findings indicate that alignment of these communities towards the features of learning communities could potentially further support teachers to engage in lifelong learning and support students to do the same. This research also indicates that such support needs to be provided in tandem with national alignment of messages about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment to ensure that a consistent view is presented to teachers about the importance of lifelong learning for themselves and for students.

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