Leading Learners: A view from the trenches[i]

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With the Australian national agenda focused on quality teachers as a strategy for improving student learning, this paper reports the author's personal interaction in leading change in three school precincts. In citing research around effective teaching and learning the author provides examples of how research influences not only decision making practices within schools but also offers insight into how the first building block for whole school change is the value of relationships.

What is the future of teaching and learning, professional development and teacher education? What are the innovative practices and new ideas in teaching and teacher education? Is the national agenda going to make any real difference to quality teaching? It is my belief that we are on the cusp right now of being able to make a significant difference to how we connect the needs of our current learners and schools with initial teacher education practices and programs and professional learning for practicing teachers.

The national agenda, if it effectively implemented so that is does not merely become a tick the box compliance exercise, could give us a common language that can guide the delivery of quality teaching to every student in the country. It could provide a common language that enhances quality partnerships between universities and schools.

I believe that there are some key qualities that must be the core of our learning: student learning outcomes must be central; relationships built on trust form the basis of success; sustained improvement, both systemic and local, will only occur while there is an organizational culture built on trust; that real collaboration, coaching and quality feedback are required for growth and development and finally that culturally competent and responsive individuals will be better teachers and learners.

McBeath (2003) uses an artful thinking palette where he identified learning as needing to be an object of attention, an object of conversation, an object of reflection and an object of learning. This appealed to me in the context of this presentation, as I believe it is about learning for all of us, no matter where we sit in the education sphere.

I believe we need 'trust as the bridge that reform must be carried over, but rather than being solid, that bridge is built on changing emotions.' (Louis, 2007) The absence of trust works to the detriment of learners who need newer pedagogies to thrive.

Back in 2003 I was involved in a research project as part of some study I was undertaking towards my Masters in International Management. The project was called 'Better Teachers, Better Outcomes, Better Territory'. I highlight this because the research we drew on then was giving many similar messages that we get from more current research and whilst there have been shifts, especially in individual setting and maybe in some regions, I am not sure how far we have really moved.

There were some aspects emerging from the research that we found could have a high impact on outcomes for students. This is not a definitive list but included:
- setting instructional goals to move students forward (Newman and Wehlage, 1995)
- Using authentic pedagogy in which teachers teach according to a collaborative vision of quality learning (San Diego, 2000)
- Peer coaches and staff developers should be involved in co-teaching demonstrations, observations, videotaping and discussion of students' work.
- The provision of high quality support to beginning teachers is important for their development
- Teachers need to have coaches in place
- Coaches meet weekly with colleagues to discuss work and learn new strategies.

- Create space and vocabulary for us to get talking about instruction (Lingard, et al, 2000).
- Providing common grounds and dialogue between teachers, school administrators, teacher educators, student teachers and others about teaching and strategy repertoires (Fullan, 2001)

Lingard (2000) claimed that our pedagogy, our teaching was too private a matter, only rarely inviting or allowing our colleagues and peers in to have look. It needs to be open, public and shared.

His research also identified that resources and talents for reform in schools do not lie in universities, experts or central offices. It lies in classrooms where skilled teachers engage in productive pedagogies. I believe the best teachers carve out careers in schools and education systems rather than universities.

Recently the Grattan Institute research publication through the work of Ben Jensen identified the following as critical for developing quality teachers: that mentoring, classroom observations and constructive feedback create more professional, collaborative teachers. In describing the need for high quality teacher education he describes a disconnection between policy and classrooms.

OECD's 2008 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) indicates that constructive feedback is not part of training and is disconnected from student learning. Effective teaching is not recognized in any way, nor in many cases is there common language for describing what good teaching looks like. The question whether or not higher pay for quality teaching is the answer remains one that will be rigorously debated, as it well should be.

According to Fullan (2000) the enemy of instructional improvement is isolation. Thus he suggested that principals meet regularly in each other's schools and observe practice in those schools. Teaching and learning are what is talked about and there is a culture of learning.

The common themes throughout the research cited to date suggest collaboration, co-operative teaching, coaching and quality feedback, observation of one another's work, schools and their leaders sharing practice re critical to quality teaching. Where in pre-service teacher education programs do students engage in learning these skills? Where in our universities are the methodologies and pedagogies demonstrated as part of the teaching practice? Where I work it is a growing culture in schools but still not yet systemic.

One of the focus areas of this conference is innovation. What does it really mean? We often think of it as something radically different but I like the way Halbert and Kaser (2012) describe it: *'recognizing what old forms are not working for all learners, identifying what the key needs of our learners are, and then creating new forms based on knowledge about what does work.'* We often apply this thinking to teachers in classrooms in our schools around the country, but do we apply it to initial teacher education programs? Do we apply it to professional learning activities?

As a person who spent quite a few years working with pre-service teachers in various ways, including lecturing when I was working as a literacy project officer in the 90's, I was always frustrated by the lack of cohesion and connection between universities and schools and the ways in which Initial Teacher Education Programs were delivered. What occurred to me was there was no common platform, no common language, for talking about the learning students were engaged

with at university, and the work that they would undertake as teachers in a school. I have not been alone in that space and the recent Grattan Institute paper: Catching UP*: Learning from the best schools systems in East Asia" by Ben Jensen (2012)*, would certainly corroborate this view. One of the four reforms in East Asia has been to provide high quality initial teacher education. The report states that initial teacher education often fails to prepare effective teachers. Many teachers find their initial education disconnected from the requirements for classroom teaching. In the most recent Productivity Commission report under findings 5.1 it suggests that high quality practicum and induction experiences for pre-service and graduate teachers play key roles in developing an effective teaching workforce. The development and strengthening of university-school partnerships is a promising avenue (Lynch Madden and Doe, 2015; Lynch et al, 2016).

Marzano, Frontier and Livingston (2012) in their recently published book called Effective Supervision: Supporting the Art and Science of Teaching' propose five conditions for developing teacher expertise:
1) A well-articulated knowledge – base for teaching
2) Focused feedback and practice
3) Opportunities to observe and discuss expertise
4) Clear criteria and a plan for success
5) Providing recognition of expertise.

How do we build these into initial teacher education programs? How do we support schools and systems to ensure that these qualities are part of the development for early career teachers? How do we support schools and systems to ensure these conditions are in place through all career stages of teachers?

If we are to meet the challenges then we need to look at new ways of working and there is a great sense of urgency as we continue to slip down the achievement ladder.

There are three NT stories that I want to share as illustrations of some of what has been identified as effective for school improvement. These stories highlight what innovation can do when built of the trust platform and when the organizational culture has a strong enough fabric to keep everything cohesive while change takes its shape.

The first was the significant change that occurred in the delivery of initial teacher education in the Territory six years ago. The second story is about remote school in west Arnhem Land and what they have done to make education meaningful for students and the community.

The third is about a school that is only two years old, of modern, open design with flexible learning space. More, it about the common language they have for connecting that has formed the basis for powerful learning for teachers, students and community.

Story One: The Teaching School Model
The first story of significance in creating change to enhance quality teaching describes the inception of the Teaching School Model, introduced into the Territory in 2006 when Professor David Lynch came to Charles Darwin University as the Head of School Education.

The partnership that was developed between Charles Darwin University (CDU) and Department of Education and Training (DET) aimed to graduate high quality, work ready teachers. Teaching Schools evolve as schools of excellence as they provide pre-service teachers with the development, guidance and support from quality mentor teachers. The partnership allows schools to have continued input into teaching course development and review. DET supported the concept in a variety of ways, the first being funding a Teaching School's Coordinator that is located at the university and acts as a bridge between schools and the university.

The Teaching School Project continues to align with current research and government agendas. In 2007 the Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training tabled its report on the inquiry into teacher education entitled *Top of the Class* (2007). This report stated that teacher education is no longer solely a university issue, but a shared responsibility between the industry and the university. A key finding was that pre-service teacher readiness is linked to both the length and the quality of the practicum. Under the Teaching School model, a pre-service teacher is allocated to a school for three terms, spending one day per week as part of the school staff and working in the same class, as well as spending block practicums in the school. This equates to 140 practicum days for the duration of the course.

The partnership has four main pillars that constitute the foundation principles:
- Development of work ready graduates who are effective staff members from the commencement if their career
- A common language of instruction by CDU and Teaching Schools based on the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework, the Australian Curriculum and learning design principles.
- Extended practicum experiences where the pre-service teachers embed themselves in the context of the school and have the opportunity to learn by doing the work of an experienced teacher through modeling and coaching principles;'
- Professional learning and development for mentor teachers and Professional Learning Leaders is ongoing to develop professional practice in line with the professional standards for graduating teachers

There is a Teaching Schools Strategic Plan and a Project Management Committee, which has representation from all stakeholders.

Both DET and CDU have contributed financially to the project over the course of the six years that it has been operational. The funding supports schools to provide onsite professional learning opportunities while releasing mentor teachers from the classroom.

Objectives
- CDU would accommodate a dedicated DET staff member to the project to represent the DET partner in discussions and decisions that involve CDU Teaching and Learning units and other discussions where relevant
- To create and facilitate professional learning programs for DET teachers participating in the DET Teaching Schools based on the content of current education courses to facilitate an enhancement of teaching capabilities within Teaching Schools

- The provision of practicum places for the maximum number of CDU students in DET Teaching Schools
- Continue existing Teaching Schools and establish opportunities for professional experience in remote NT schools.
- Create opportunities for post graduate accreditation for workplace learning and research
- Identified DET curriculum and pedagogy initiatives continue to be included in the content of the Teaching and Learning Units where relevant
- Teaching Schools' Strategic Plans be updated annually by the Teaching Schools Steering Committee - this strategic plan to direct the development of the Teaching Schools Project.

A Professional Learning Leader is identified in each school and the school provides additional time for the PLL to work with mentor teachers and pre-service teachers. They provide immediate support to all and also provide professional learning opportunities in the school context (for example, behaviour management strategies). They also meet four times per year as a group to give updates and provide advice and discuss issues regarding the Teaching School model. In the formative days of the project they were a powerful lobby group to ensure the needs of schools were being met and the interaction between the schools and universities remained strong. They provided feedback regarding course content to ensure it was meeting the needs of the schools and having work ready teachers emerging from the course into schools as teachers. Some Professional Learning Leaders also lectured in some of the undergraduate modules on site at the university.

A mentor teacher's forum was held in 2011 and again in 2012 with over 100 people attending both times. The teacher Registration Board has a strong presence at the forums, and there is training for mentors in coaching and providing quality feedback.

The PLLs participate in a "Mentoring for Effective Teaching Workshop' (which has been reworked to meet Masters level requirements) so they can provide appropriate support to their mentorees. Other support includes Cognitive Coaching Foundation training for five participants. *Working as Partners* workshops were provided, with the intention of giving current information to both mentor and pre-service teachers regarding the course expectations and to generate conversations between mentors and pre-service teachers about their needs and expectations associated with the course and to assist in the maintenance of a productive relationship.

The change was challenging on many fronts, but the outcomes over the past six years have made the journey worthwhile. The graduate teachers emerging from this program are highly sought after by schools. If we think about readiness in the relationship where trust is promoted, there is facilitated shared communication, and uncovering a teacher's espoused platform. The supervisor and teacher are ready to focus on the ongoing skills of reflection and inquiry that serve as the centre of the observation and feedback cycle.

Inquiry into what we typically do is central to reflective teaching because it forces us to question our teaching beliefs and behaviours in light of student learning. The pre-service teacher and mentor teacher working together over a year, and established support systems in schools, makes a difference to the quality of teaching and learning over the course of the degree (Nolan and Hoover, 2008).

A range of testimonials from participating school principals has been gathered over time regarding this model of pre-service education and practicum experiences. Some common messages that the testimonials reiterated by many and seen to be required to ensure the model is successful include:

- Collaboration
- Common language
- Connectedness
- Partnerships
- Positive relationships
- Funding
- Professional learning opportunities

The qualities of the model identified throughout the testimonials clearly link to what research says makes a difference.

Story Two: Cultures of Collaboration

My next story of significance is about a remote school located in Arnhem Land that is completely isolated in the wet season. It has a school population of about 420 students and like many remote schools had a history of poor attendance for many reasons, but also including time off school for cultural business, for both students and local staff.

The purpose of telling the story of this school is because it has been on a journey that highlights some aspects of what the research is saying makes a positive difference. This is specifically in relation to developing cultural competence and awareness for all within the school. It is a story of respectful relationships and it is a story of innovation. If we understand that socialisation into particular cultures leads to habitual patterns of perceiving, thinking, judging, responding, interacting and behaving, then I think we understand why being culturally competent makes so much difference to how we work and behave, ultimately leading to better learning outcomes for students.

If we are to operate as culturally competent educators, we need to recognize and suspend our habitual responses and explore the underlying cultural drive of these personal habits. That is what the school induction program attempts to do through cultural awareness development using a program called Cultures of Collaboration (NT DET, 2002).

Cultures of Collaboration takes participants through a process that looks at existing workplace cultures and how these cultures are maintained and significant ways they may differ from other cultures. It is a process that supports participants to work deeply with others from different cultural perspectives to co-create collaborative cultures enabling powerful ways of moving forward.

The program is grounded in the understanding that our perceptions of situations, ourselves and others and the ways we think, make judgments, interact and respond have a huge impact on the success or otherwise of our interactions.

The school has a co-principalship in place, with an indigenous and non-indigenous principal leading the school. There are shared responsibilities, shared decision making and shared connection with community. This works because it based on a highly respectful relationship. It

provides opportunities for one to work closely with community, and for both to stand side by side as an equal partnership in the school and community. They bring very different skills to the team.

The school operates on three domains – Class, Crew and Culture. There are strong community engagement processes that include : an open school that is inviting for students and families, Wole Woleh (meaning afternoon activities) a 3-9 program that provides opportunities for community members to engage in learning activities (e.g. getting a licence) and engages a range of providers; and a School Council that is active and engaged. One key result through 2011 was the re-development of the school calendar. This was worked through with community and the local seasons used to redevelop school times to suit the community. This meant school starts early January when the area is flooded in and everyone is in town, and a longer break in the dry season when locals tend to be more transient and school attendance drops. Some of the women painted the stories as community members and senior leadership team worked through the issues (Lynch and Smith, 2016a; 2016b).

The school has a strong Attendance Strategy that includes the following:
- Attendance is everyone's business
- Every class has a plan on a page
- Monitoring of attendance is done through the Clontarf (senior boys program that uses AFL to develop incentives, team and learning support) and Role Models programs (a girls program that uses sport as well as other things to keep girls engaged);
- Rewards for families that get 100% attendance for their children;
- Class awards are given to classes that achieve high attendance;

The success factors that have made a difference to the school and how it operates within a complex community, is based on the following:
- Deep respectful relationships built over time;
- Hard work and creativity that has engaged many staff
- Time for community engagement that comes from having the co-principalship.

The wins for the school have included:
- Increased attendance
- An engaged and productive school council
- Increased staff retention
- Ability of the team on the ground to move more effectively with the ebb and flow of community
- Better engagement of students
- More quality programs and quality teaching
- Willingness of community to engage

The school has worked on their organizational culture and built a trust fabric. There is collaboration at many levels: teachers, community, and broader links to business.

There are open classrooms and teacher feedback, and an induction program for staff that is done by local staff and mentoring by local staff. Whilst it is not perfect there is a significant difference

to the attendance and already some improvement to academic achievement because of better attendance and a deeper understanding by staff of the local culture. Most importantly is the connection between community and school that is strong and therefore problems can be worked through, taking the time and cultural understanding that is sometimes required.

Story Three: Co-Teaching within Differential Classrooms

The next school story I want to share is that of a primary school in Palmerston, a satellite city about 20kms from Darwin city central. In 2010 Palmerston was the fastest growing city in Australia.

The school is designed on the principles of learning that we associate with 21st century learners. Getting the families on board from the beginning and having them involved in discussions that relate to the development of practices in the school - building their understanding – made a difference.

The school has looked at the best practices of co-teaching within differentiated classrooms in order to continuously improve and positively impact student academic outcomes. Their aim has been to establish and embed the defining characteristics of co-teaching at the school and to highlight factors that contribute to its success and sustainability, as identified in the school's Strategic Plan. The story shows how shared understandings and a common dialogue for discourse are essential for creating learning environments that meet the increasingly diverse needs of today's students while at the same time addressing practical issues that are faced by school professionals.

One of the main reasons for the success of this innovation is because the school was so proactive about it, from the establishment of a skeleton team working with an Interim School Council to the present, and making it up front and centre of the school culture. There is also a genuinely, truly collaborative staff.

The school uses 'A Guide to Co-teaching', 2nd Edition, by Villa, Thousand and Nevin as the nominated reference text. A copy is provided to each teacher and used in collaboration with a multimedia kit as the basis for planning and implementation of co-teaching.

Using the one text as the main reference point provides consistency in the approach to the types of co-teaching models (supportive, parallel, complementary, and team-teaching) and a universal vocabulary with which to converse and discuss all co-teaching matters.

The implementation in the school includes the following:
- Ongoing training via the Facilitators Guide to Co-Teaching during the five collaborative planning days
- Provision of additional in class support, including provision of opportunities for co-teaching partners to teach others;
- Education for the wider school community
- Classroom Walkthrough's to open feedback loops on practice
- Provision of 2 non-contact hours as collaborative planning time for each co-teaching team

The school evaluates the co-teaching effectiveness through a range of assessment tools including:

- Student surveys
- Use of co-teaching reflection tool at the end of each semester, enabling teachers to evaluate, engage in dialogue and/or think about the success of their co-teaching practices
- A reflection tool that allows partners to make changes to further refine their co-teaching practices
- Administration of a co-teaching framework in Semester One that provides teachers with a vehicle with which to reflect on, discuss and present a range of common, publicly agreed on goals that are particular to their co-teaching practice.

The reflection tool reviews practices relate to them Instructional Environment and instructional delivery. The co-teaching approach looks at supportive, parallel, complimentary and team teaching approaches. It requires each teacher to rate themselves using descriptors under the headings initiating, developing and sustaining practices. Teachers then talk about what they will focus on to enhance their co-teaching practices.

This is innovation at its best - innovation that builds on a concept that has worked well, but has been modified in an extremely effective way of working that brings together what the research is saying works – de-privatised teaching where quality observations and feedback are part of the fabric of the school culture. The principal has identified that there are real, regular quality conversations about teaching – what teachers are doing with their students and how the students are responding.

Conclusion

These schools have managed to build what Lingard (2002) refers to as 'positive emotional economies within schools' and the leaders of the schools have played a huge role in developing the positive learning culture in their settings.

Fullan (2001) identifies that the role of the leader is to ensure that the organization develops relationships that help produce desirable results. He also refers to 'change leaders who work on changing the context, helping create new settings conducive to learning and sharing that learning'.

Effective leaders understand the value and role of knowledge creation. They make it a priority and set about establishing and reinforcing habits of knowledge exchange among organizational members.

Back in 2002 Lingard raised the possibility of providing common grounds for dialogue between administrators, teacher educators, student teachers and others about repertoires, which aspects of our repertoires work best for improved intellectual and social out comes for distinctive groups of students.

The whole notion of common language for discourse conjures images of people at all levels in education being able to talk about learning, innovative practices and students achieving to their potential as engaged and thinking learners.

The challenge that educators face is how to maintain the integrity of the conversations and ways of working that is in place in regions and schools when there are changes that come from the

system that isn't necessarily in sync with school practices, and this includes the sometimes as hoc implementation processes devised. Leaders need to find ways to fit these requirements into the school language and make it work for them.

All Australian governments, universities, school sectors and individual schools have a responsibility to work together to support high quality teaching and school leadership, including pre-service teacher education. How can we support and develop the learners that we are working with? Are we good enough? Do we have the courage to make the changes we need to make?

In The Five Literacies of Global Leadership (2007) it states that '*without the ability to constantly raise consciousness, and hence wisdom, concerning the fundamental shifts that are transforming everything around us, we risk becoming too set in our ways. Cocooned from actuality, yet unwilling and unable to learn and adapt, the risk is that we turn our back on future possibilities, seeking solace in the seductive lie of nostalgia for a past that is no longer relevant to our real needs.* Unless we make changes to what we are doing then we sit in the nostalgia of the past.

With our networked global world we know what the research is saying about what we need to do. There is no luxury of ignorance. We need to reformulate how we do education, from initial education systems, in schools, in universities, in professional learning opportunities for practicing teachers, in the leadership sphere.

We know that relationships precede learning: where is that particular skill embedded in our ITE's? Where do we see lecturers having their practice videoed and critiqued and their pedagogical practices challenged? Where in initial teacher education programs do we see embedded cultural competence development? How do initial teacher education programs help beginning teachers to know how to create classrooms that are physically and culturally inviting, where instructional changes are made to accommodate differences?

We know that the interpersonal and cultural context of learning has a profound impact on student's motivation and performance, so that if students feel a lack of belonging, or have a low level of trust in the people around them, or a sense that teachers do not value their intelligence, then their feelings of competence, their motivation and their performance will be lessened. This is true of every learner, child or adult, young or not so young. The system must be transformed to meet both the quality and equity needs of all learners.

We all have a part to play, including the work and influence regulatory authorities can have in the positive and effective implementation of registration and the National Professional Standards for Teachers and the accreditation of initial teacher education programs.

We need to continue to forge effective communication and connective dialogue. We all have to have the will to be innovative, to challenge the pedagogical practices of teachers – in universities as well as in schools - and we have to keep the real quality teaching agenda alive and active.

We know that teaching is a complex skill so teacher supervision and teacher quality needs to be multifaceted and have a problem solving approach.

In the words of Einstein *'You cannot change a problem with the same consciousness that created the problem in the first place'.*

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i This paper was first published in Teachers Talk About What's Important: Papers from 2012 International Teacher Education Dialogue Conference as 'Leading Learnings'