

# Effective Professional Development

Making a difference  
in terms of Improving  
Student Learning Outcomes

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I am both privileged and indebted to have been given this opportunity and it is my hope that by sharing my learning journey and this report with others, it will help promote discussion about the importance effective professional development has on improving students' learning outcomes.

## **Abstract**

***“Opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning and development can have a substantial impact on student learning” (H. Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007 )***

This report documents a research project carried out during the 2007 ASB/APPA Travelling Fellowship. The focus of the research was to investigate professional development for teachers’, and ways to evaluate its effectiveness in terms of improved student learning outcomes.

The report begins with an extensive review of both the established and emerging literature in this area. It then documents the wide range of organisations and events visited during the fellowship and describes what was learnt about this area from both a theoretical and a practical perspective.

The literature indicates that it is critical that professional development be evaluated in this way but most schools and professional development providers contacted were only evaluating their professional development in terms of teacher satisfaction. Many stated that evaluating professional development with data and evidence of improved student outcomes is simply not possible. However, the literature documents that it is in fact possible and some organisation are doing it effectively.

This report then makes a series of recommendations on how professional development can be more effective in the New Zealand setting. These recommendations focus on principals and their role as the educational leaders of their schools. It recommends that they must be actively involved in focussing the vision on improved student outcomes and in providing the framework for the implementation and evaluation of professional development in their schools.

# Literature Review

## Introduction

Professional development is an important aspect of any organisation. Within the education sector the professional development of teachers is not only a requirement for teachers so that they can meet minimum teaching standards, it is necessary to support the continued need for teachers to develop knowledge and skills and is essential for the continued improvement of student learning. Schools today need to be strong professional learning communities where teacher learning is embedded within the school culture. Elmore and Burney note that “Professional development ... lies at the centre of educational reform and instructional improvement” (Elmore & Burney, 1999, p. 263).

Professional development is both theoretically and practically significant as it is a key component of all educational reform (Hawley & Valli, 1999). The majority of educational theory supports the importance of professional development for both teachers and students. Within the rapidly changing world of education, teachers and their teaching practice can easily stagnate, and they can fail to keep up with the required pace of change. Teachers operate predominantly within an isolated environment and therefore it is pivotal for schools to have a development structure that encourages teachers to get together with their peers and talk about their practice, share their ideas and knowledge, and reflect and improve their own teaching practice (Annan, Lai, & Robinson, 2003; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Lieberman & Miller, 1990; H. Timperley, 2005).

Although many factors are involved in improving student learning, it is “what teachers know and are able to do” that is the most important (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). There are two main aspects to this important process:

**Professional development:** for the purpose of this review is defined as the “process and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students”. It needs to be an “intentional, ongoing and systematic process” (Guskey, 2000). This term professional development is used to describe the delivery of information or knowledge to teachers so that their practice can be adapted or changed.

**Professional learning:** seen as the internal process by which individual teachers create professional knowledge through a variety of interactions. This must be an intentional process, and it demands “strong policy support and professional determination” (H. Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007 ). This may involve constructed opportunities to learn through events such as conferences, seminars, by working with outside consultants, or through participation in a learning community within a particular school. It may also be through a conversation with a colleague about a practice situation or a problem and needs to be actively supported by the school leadership.

There is an increased emphasis on schools and organisations to not only engage in professional development, but also to evaluate the effectiveness of this professional development particularly focusing on enhancing the quality of teaching (Piggot-Irvine, 2007). A recently-released document, Teacher Professional Learning and Development: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES) (Timperley et al., 2007) states that “opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning and development can have a substantial impact on student learning”. The BES which is based on a summary of international findings of “the emerging knowledge base about how to promote teacher learning in ways that impact on outcomes” is a document that will affect student learning within New Zealand and internationally. The writers have endeavoured to “investigate the links between particular professional learning opportunities and their direct impact on teaching practice” (H. Timperley et al., 2007 ).

## **Effective Professional Learning and Development**

There is no sound evidence or prescription for the delivery method or mode of effective professional development or learning. No one recipe fits all conditions or school environments. It is reaching an “optimal mix” through using a “collection” of methods where a set of guidelines are met and sustained. Guskey states that “better practice has a focus on developing teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge in sufficient depth to form the basis of principled decisions about practice” (Guskey, 1994). If teacher learning is going to address problems in students’ achievement, there needs to be a focus on the “skills and knowledge that are required for those providing the professional learning opportunities” (H. S. Timperley & Parr, 2007) because it is clear from the research that it is the interactions between students and teachers within the classroom environment that improve learning opportunities for students.

The major focus of this Fellowship was the evaluation of professional development that was believed to be effective. This next section discusses some of the main findings from the literature in this area. This section is structured similarly to the BES, which looks at contextual conditions, the content of the professional learning/development, activities that promote teacher learning, the professional learning processes and the responses of the teachers involved in the process. The final section focuses on an overall summary of the literature in this area.

### **Context**

Each school creates its own unique context and conditions that have an impact on the effectiveness of professional learning. The BES (H. Timperley et al., 2007 ) lists seven elements that have been identified as important for professional learning effectiveness in terms of their impact on student outcomes. These conditions are:

- Providing time for extended learning opportunities and using the time effectively
- Engaging external expertise
- Focussing on engaging teachers in the learning process irrespective of whether the process was compulsory or voluntary
- Challenging problematic discourse such as “some students cannot learn because they are ...”
- Providing opportunities to interact in a community of teaching professionals
- Ensuring content is consistent with wider policy trends
- In school-based initiatives, having school leaders actively promoting and leading the professional learning opportunities

Hawley and Valli are significant researchers in the areas of professional development. In 2006 they wrote a synthesis of the professional development literature for the Westchester Institutes for Human Service Research (Hawley & Valli, 2006). In this synthesis they find that high quality professional development must be:

- Informed by research on teaching and learning and providing a strong foundation in subject content and methods of teaching
- Integrated with district goals to improve education, guided by a coherent long-term plan, and driven by disaggregated data on student outcomes
- Designed in response to teacher-identified needs and utilising collaborative problem solving in which colleagues assist one another by discussing dilemmas and challenges

- Continuous and ongoing, incorporating principles of adult learning, and providing follow-up support for further learning
- Evaluated ultimately on the basis of its impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning

They recommend that these characteristics be the basis for designing professional development both with and for teachers. They state that these contextual conditions are needed but not always sufficient to promote improved learning.

## **Content**

There is wide debate surrounding the characteristics that contribute to effective professional development. There are many complex components, however there is a consensus in the literature that teachers need to be engaged in programmes that are focused and relevant and that there needs to be strong emphasis on teaching and learning. Teachers need to “engage with new knowledge that involves both theoretical understandings and the implications of these for practice” (H. Timperley et al., 2007 ). Newly acquired knowledge needs to improve the links between teaching and its impact on student learning. This happens when teachers are part of an environment that extends and sustains opportunities to learn using a variety of activities and then assists them to integrate this new knowledge into changed practice. Development effectiveness is enhanced when providers and teachers negotiate the content of this new knowledge and discuss the implications for practice with the participants.

## **Activities constructed to promote professional learning**

The literature suggests that although activities are important, there appear to be no particular activities that are more effective than others. However it is important that “teachers engage in multiple and aligned opportunities that support them to learn and apply new understandings and skills” or “that combining positive models or activities” is more effective (Guskey, 2000; Hawley & Valli, 1999). The BES states that the following characteristics are important in the construction of professional learning activities:

- Content and activities are aligned
- A variety of activities is needed
- The content conveyed through the activity is more important than any particular activity
- The professional instruction activity is sequenced from engagement to theory and then translation into practice
- Understandings are discussed and negotiated in the context of the teacher’s existing knowledge
- A student-focused perspective is maintained

## **Learning Processes**

For teachers to change their behaviour and/or teaching practice, there is a need for them either to gain new knowledge and skills or to challenge their existing “theories of practice” (H. Timperley et al., 2007 ). Guskey discusses the need for teachers to have the “capacity to deliberately and wisely use the knowledge (old and new) that they have” (Guskey, 1994). The BES uses a mix of “theory and evidence” when discussing this area, “as the process of understanding how to change teaching practices is seen as a neglected area in research” (H. Timperley et al., 2007 ). Even with this



limitation, these findings can be used by leaders and providers as a basis for the construction and evaluation of professional development. They are that:

- Substantive change is difficult
- Developing new understandings and extending skills is necessary, but these new understandings need to be based on existing knowledge
- New understanding is more effective when it is consistent with the teacher's existing conceptual frameworks
- If the new understandings challenged current concepts then a rejection is likely
- With a systematic approach using evidence-based skills of enquiry, teachers can learn to regulate their own and others' learning resulting in sustainable learning

### **Evaluating the effect of professional development**

The evaluation of professional development is a vital tool that can be used to ensure that teachers are gathering new knowledge and skills that will ultimately affect the improvement of students' learning. Guskey states "that evaluations are often too shallow" and that the "evaluative efforts are frequently too brief" (Guskey, 2000) and reinforces that the primary focus of professional development for school leaders should be linked to improved learning. Evaluation needs to involve asking good questions and gathering valid information. A report by the NZ Education Review Office in 2000, states that there was an "absence of systems for evaluating the effectiveness of programmes" (Education Review Office, 2000) in New Zealand schools, however, there are tools that can be used and professional development evaluation must become part of the culture of the organisation.

Guskey has developed a process that helps determine the best fit of a professional development programme for one's local context. This process can also be used to fine tune programmes once they are in use. His five-level process begins with measuring participant reaction and then measuring the knowledge and skills gained through the participants' learning. The final evaluative steps involve asking three important questions. The process begins with an evaluation of whether the professional development undertaken did promote change that was aligned with the organisation's goals and policies. It continues by asking whether the new knowledge learned made a difference to teachers' professional practice, and then by using multiple measures, it asks if there has been a positive effect on student learning outcomes. It is suggested that through the use of this framework, leaders can become "better-informed consumers of professional development" (Collins, 2000).

It is clear from the literature that evaluation is an essential and ongoing part of the process of professional development and that it needs to be planned and based on sound, reliable data and/or evidence. In practice, however, this process is cited by most practitioners as being fraught with difficulty and they suggest that the task of evaluation should be left to expert researchers. However, current research clearly indicates that there is in fact a framework of tools that schools can use and questions they can ask themselves before even embarking on a professional development path.

This also applies to consultants and facilitators of programmes who need to ensure that their content and delivery is effective in terms of improved student learning outcomes over an extended cycle.

In conclusion, professional development or professional learning, whether internal or external to an organisation, is required to change teacher attitudes and behaviours, and it is important that this is evaluated in terms of "the ultimate goal of all professional development which is improved student achievement" (Mundry & Loucks-Horsley, 1999).

## Research Setting

My study included visits to and dialogue with research specialists in the area of Evaluation of Professional Development in the United Kingdom, Sweden, Canada, United States of America, Australia and New Zealand. Although I visited a variety of professional development organisations, schools and universities, and attended a range of conferences, I focused on four specific areas:

- Schools or districts which supported the evaluation of professional development
- Professional learning and leadership centres, universities and training facilities which provided professional development
- Conferences or discussions with academics and practitioners who focused on supporting schools in this area
- Reading and discussing New Zealand and overseas research in this area

Throughout all these settings my primary focus was firstly on the professional development model that was operating and on the evaluation process that was linked to this development. During conversations with academics and researchers, I developed a better understanding of the current trends in evaluation and also the common issues that stand in the way of organisations implementing a sound system.



I began my study with the hypothesis that although the evaluation of professional development was highly complex, and that there was little agreement on the criteria for effective professional development, that “careful planning ...makes evaluation easier and it also leads to much more effective professional development” (Kirkpatrick, 1998 ) and that leadership was a critical factor in fostering both student and teacher learning.

## Methodology

The method of data and information gathering was set before beginning the fellowship. Following on from previous study, I revisited and extended my reading and review of literature in this area. I then began by starting to look for organisations and schools that were operating programmes that met my original criteria, of being “currently involved in professional development that is evaluated in terms of improved student learning outcomes”.



I intended to carry out and analyse interviews using standardised questions, gather programme information where available in written or electronic form and then blatantly ask for evidence or links that connected the development to student learning.

My specific area of interest centred on probing the following questions:

- What type of professional development are you (schools) involved in?
- Who is providing the professional development: external organisations or internal?
- How is the professional development evaluated? How do the participants perceive the development and is it independently evaluated?
- Do schools and professional development providers have evidence that shows that it is making a difference to student learning?
- How does this development relate to the criteria found in the literature that documents successful professional development in terms of improved student outcomes?
- Are professional development and its evaluation the subjects of on-going academic research?
- Does the professional development emphasis relate to Government policy driven and/or funded initiatives?

As well as visiting a range of educational organisations, I planned to attend a selection of conferences to engage with current researchers and listen to a range of speakers and their presentations. These conferences are seen throughout most of the countries that I visited as a major form of professional development and learning for leaders and teachers within schools. During these sessions, I had the opportunity to speak to participants at all levels of schooling in a setting where they were currently involved or actively participating in professional learning.



During my visits to Principal/Leadership Centres and universities I spent time with key personnel discussing their model of development and talking and working alongside course participants in order to develop an understanding of local educational needs and the relationship with the programmes and courses offered.



As the fellowship progressed it became necessary to refocus my original emphasis and questions as most individuals and organisations seemed to have a plethora of reasons for not evaluating professional development. It would have been restrictive to have continued on the original path, so although continuing to look at development in a range of contexts and continuing to ask the same questions, I took more note of why they were not utilising evaluation strategies or linking their learning with improved student learning outcomes.

## **Findings and Analysis**

This findings and analysis section outlines the organisations visited and conferences attended during this Fellowship. Discussions with a wide range of personnel throughout this time have also impacted strongly on this section. Although discussion was based on the research questions, most developed into more complex conversations and focused on specific topics that were related to each organisation. There were few occasions or interviews where the limitations of evaluating professional development were not raised. These limitations feature in this section and have assisted with the formulation of the recommendations in this report.

### **Leadership Centres**

Leadership Centres usually focus their programmes on Principal and Leadership Development, however as part of this process they are equipping leaders with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to lead their own staff in professional development. Alongside these complex leadership programmes, there were also centres of research and development that in some cases offer a wide range of professional development opportunities to schools and to teachers at all levels of experience.

During my visits to these Leadership Centres across several countries, and through participation in their programmes or during discussion with key staff in these organisations, I found that most organisations had a common purpose and vision. They all spoke about their leadership or learning centre in terms of being focused on the support and development of both current and future leaders within the context of education.

The programmes they offered predominately revolved around serving the professional development needs of leaders in education through “building skills, knowledge and confidence to make a difference to the lives of children and young people” (NCSL, 2007). Some were currently involved in or were actively developing programmes that would prepare and support both present and future leaders and were developing a range of programmes and services that would deliver professional development to all education related professionals. Most were also accredited or linked with a University academic programme and had an integrated approach to enhancing learning.

The National College of School Leadership in the United Kingdom offers a wide range of programmes where leaders are encouraged to “reflect on practice, work with colleagues, coaches and mentors, visit other schools, carry out research and explore the latest thinking on school leadership” (National College School Leadership, 2007). They deliver specific programmes for all leadership level practitioners in schools including business managers, and also deliver Government Multi-Agency team programmes such as “Every Child Matters” and “Leadership of ICT”. They actively encourage members to join their Leadership Network and have a strong research and policy group that informs the NCSL programmes and initiatives. They use their E-learning Gateway to connect leaders across the country and have an Annual Conference which is well attended.



The London Centre for Leadership and Learning states that their “new and important” centre is focused on the “development of London as a world class city for education” and provides professional development for teachers, leaders, lecturers and other education-related professionals. They have specific courses for all phases of the sector and strongly address areas of Government focus such as

the Every Child Matters agenda. Several schools that I talked with around the London Area used the Institute of Education, University of London to provide their Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes. The institute actively tailors development opportunities to meet specific school or cluster needs.

Similarly, the Vancouver Leadership Institute is part of the University of British Columbia and it endeavours to engage scholars and leaders in the exchange of knowledge through a wide variety of programmes and through academic work. Their vision is based on the idea of building capacity for practices in educational leadership. Their current emphasis is on Conflicting Policy Environments which addresses areas of social justice, globalisation and other competing purposes for education. They currently have three focus areas: Parent leadership, Joining Hands which is a focus on Indigenous and Aboriginal Education, and Leadership and Research.

### **Leadership Conferences**

Conferences are seen as one of the major vehicles for professional development for both leaders and teachers across all the countries visited on this Fellowship. They are seen to play a major role in the professional development of current leaders, as an extension of the learning from Leadership and Principal Development Centres and through my limited discussions and visits in the United States and Canada it appears that in many cases they are the only form of ongoing professional development.

The first conference I attended was the International Confederation of Principals (ICP) which was held in April in Auckland, and was attended by delegates from across the world. The aims of this organisation are vast but many are strongly related to the topic of Professional Leadership and Development. The ICP aims to encourage a close relationship between school leaders in all nations, promoting professionalism and the exchange of people and publications. They endeavour to encourage participation in conferences across national boundaries. The 8<sup>th</sup> World Convention theme “Leading Edge” was selected as an expression of the role leaders today have in educating the next generation as the “leaders of learners”.

The conference featured many highly skilled key note speakers and session presenters who all spoke around the theme and developed the notion that “effective leaders and their visions for their schools are driven by values” (Kate Griffin, ICP President). Principals that I interviewed who attended this conference spoke of the development in terms of personal growth in leadership, the networking opportunities that existed at such events, the global perspective that comes from an International Conference and as “leader of learners” the need to stay up to date with current research and trends in education.



In the Britain, the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) holds an annual conference that is well attended and in 2007 was entitled “Future leadership, future leaders”. The theme this year in Birmingham was designed to focus on educational leadership in the fast moving and changing environment that is facing schools today. There was a strong emphasis on the students being at the centre of all that leaders do. There was a rich line up of speakers including Michael Fullan, Professor Dame Pat Collarbone, Professor Andy Hargreaves, Professor David Hargreaves and Daniel Goleman. This conference was highly structured and is seen as a form of “continuing education” building on the NCSL’s programmes. Participants had a common grounding and used this opportunity to continue their own personal and professional development. The College programmes and specialists were highly visible and actively setting up

(selling) local CPD services and promoting their ongoing leadership programmes. The only negative comments came from aspiring Leaders or Heads who had completed a raft of development courses and were still unable to gain headship (principal) posts. There were also many comments about the need to contextualize their development as Leaders, and that this was often difficult for them once they were back in their school environments.

The 13<sup>th</sup> World Thinking Conference in Sweden was attended by teaching staff and leaders and seen as an opportunity to “Explore the Unknown” in terms of future thinking and future learning for students. This conference offered a unique mix of academics from different fields and professions and participants came from a wide range of sectors, disciplines, countries and cultures. For schools that are endeavouring to develop a thinking-based learning approach, the conference provided the opportunity to hear experts in this field and to attend a wide range of workshops where educators presented their learning journeys.

During these sessions my questions to presenters and attendees were based around the professional development required to change schools and how the effectiveness of this process was evaluated. Some presenters were clearly able to show the links and models used. They were predominantly externally-based development programmes or involved contracting consultants who supported teacher learning that was focused on the school philosophy. This knowledge was then brought back to the individual institution and shared within an existing supportive learning community.



The Australian Council for Educational Leaders/ Association for Supervisions and Curriculum Development (ACEL/ASCD) Conference, New Imagery for Schools and Schooling held in Australia was a further opportunity to hear leading educationalists speak on the latest research into the effectiveness of professional learning for teachers. Professor Viviane Robinson from New Zealand opened the conference with the William Walker Oratory. She presented her latest research “School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why”. This investigation was a refined analysis of the impact that leadership has on a range of student outcomes. The results show that although five leadership dimensions were measured, one type had far more effect than the other four. The most powerful effect size came from “direct leader involvement in the oversight of, and participation in, curriculum planning and coordination and teacher learning and professional development. It is worth noting that this factor has more than twice the effect of any other factor. This suggests that the closer leaders are to the core business of teaching and learning, the more they are likely to make a difference to students” (Robinson, 2007 ).

### **District Conferences**

Conferences throughout Canada and the United States appear to be the major focus of all teacher professional development in those countries. Some are based on specific learning areas, some address government or district focus areas, and many pick up what is seen as a learning deficit from the national testing system. In Canada I attended the British Columbia Summer Conference where the theme “Lead by Example” was chosen to reflect the need for all stakeholders to promote excellence in achievement. The conference was attended by staff at all levels and it is the School District Superintendents who allocate these professional development opportunities. The attendees made the following comments about this rather centralised system of professional development allocation.

*“You get to go to one or sometimes two conferences a year” (BC Teacher)*

*“Selection is based on student and school data that the Superintendent collects and we are then given opportunities to attend” (BC Principal)*

*“You never know what the emphasis will be and what use it will be back in school” (BC Head of Department)*



The main conference presenter was Professor Thomas Guskey and the plenary and workshops sessions focused on “Implementing Mastery Learning Grading and Reporting Student Learning”. During both of these sessions he spoke of his research and literature on the “Effectiveness of Professional Development”. Each District Superintendent presented a workshop and once again I asked about the evaluation of the initiatives that they were involved in. Unfortunately there was little evidence that any of the professional development involved evaluation and I was repeatedly told that “evaluation of the development would be looked at further down the track once the initiative was off the ground”.

*“We do not know what evidence to collect yet, but after 5 years of the programme we will look at it” (Assistant Superintendent)*

*“Evaluation of staff development is too hard – but we do look at the student data at District Level” (District Superintendent)*

*“We know that it is making a difference but we don’t want to evaluate it and jeopardise the project. Teachers don’t like to be evaluated, but we will look at gathering evidence later”*

## **Schools**

During this Fellowship I visited only a small number of schools. These were in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

Those I visited in and around London seemed to be fairly focused on their own professional development needs, but felt bound by the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) agendas that were operating. They had some control over their development options but tended to use their local centres and advisors to deliver professional development packages aimed at assisting teachers to address the disparity in learning achievement.



I visited several areas where clusters of schools were working together in partnership arrangements. These schools appeared to be more aware of their development needs and were far more pro-active in the area of evaluation of these programmes. The Chisel Education Partnership in the United Kingdom comprised 28 schools. They had developed a collaborative culture with the aim of raising student learning standards across all the schools. They insisted that their OFSTED results were published jointly and used these results in evaluating their professional development. They had CPD “twilight sessions” on a fortnightly basis and included all staff in this process. They talked about their needs in terms of improving teaching, they built strong relationships, they monitored their success in terms of



collecting and analysing student learning data and believed that through this collaborative and yet accountable approach they were changing teachers' focus and their practice.

A similar model was operating in Australia based around Kyabram Secondary College in Australia. They actively changed their professional development culture so that they could give more meaningful information and feedback to staff on their teaching and have a more positive impact on the learning of the students. They set up teams aimed at engaging teachers in discussing student learning based on achievement data and information. They provided guidance and training to establish the relationship and the environment required to do this effectively and then collectively set goals and targets for improving outcomes for students. Once these groups were established, they provided a range of professional development support and learning and then evaluated their success directly, taking student outcomes in the targeted areas. They described their system as non-threatening, non-judgmental, empowering, supportive, collaborative, respectful and yet rigorous. They were able to draw clear links between their professional development and improved practice and student outcomes.

I visited several "New Zealand Extending High Standards Across Schools (EHSAS) Clusters" who had a teacher professional development emphasis. Once again these clustering schools were able to articulate their direction and gave a clear idea of how they were involved in ongoing evaluation of their professional development. The leaders were able to articulate their school vision and direction in terms of improving learning and realised that it was important to link this closely to the development of their teachers. By intentionally setting up a learning community focus through either mentoring, coaching or learning community discussions, they were all beginning to gather and analyse student data and link this to teachers' practice. They were thus able to be more responsive to the learning needs of both their staff and students.

In some of these clusters, it was not necessarily the cluster emphasis or even the professional development model that was being used that made the difference, it was the fact that they had shared ownership and a sense of accountability for their development. They seemed determined to make a difference in terms of improving student learning outcomes and had a belief that the cluster arrangements would allow this to happen.



## Limitations

Throughout all of these discussions and visits, leaders and teachers gave a wide range of reasons for not evaluating professional development or linking it to student data or improved student learning. The following anecdotal information gave me valuable insight into what was stopping this process from happening and also helped to form my report recommendations.

The most commonly espoused issue was that they did not believe that you could analytically connect teacher learning and improved student learning outcomes. Most of the Principals did not believe that this process was possible and they felt there were too many variables to allow these connections to be made.

*"The links between student learning and professional development success or learning are impossible to connect" (Head Teacher, UK)*

They all had a genuine concern that teachers would find this process untenable and too hard. It was commonly felt that if hard data on student achievement were available to organisations such as the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in the United Kingdom and the Education Review Office (ERO) in New Zealand then this was a direct threat to the teachers as they would be measured by this data. The teachers unions were also cited as being opposed to this as they also saw it as a method of evaluating teachers.

*“The unions would not allow us to do this. We would end up in all sorts of trouble” (Principal, Canada)*

*“We do nothing but test our students. We don’t need to test them for anything else” (Principal, USA)*

*“We spend all our CPD time just getting our literacy levels moving. Teachers know they are making a difference” (Head, UK)*

The second most common issue was loosely related to government and district professional development initiatives that were given or allocated to schools. Leaders believed that these were given to schools and that there was no need to contextualise their teachers’ learning after attending or participating in a course and that the school had no need to participate in the evaluation of these external programmes. Principals appeared to opt out of their responsibilities as the leaders of learning and just took the professional development opportunities that were handed out. They certainly supported staff attendance but did not play a part in leading, evaluating or at times even participating in this development.

*“We get little enough professional development and we have so many other social issues at school we don’t have time to evaluate what the teachers are doing” (Head, UK)*

Most school leaders talked about the wide range of development opportunities that their staff were currently engaged in. They felt that with teachers involved in such a wide variety of professional development options, evaluation would be very difficult.

Finally, most of the organisations whose purpose was to provide professional development did not relate their content or delivery to the current literature on professional development improving student learning. They rarely had a policy or procedure for evaluating their work or tools to use in assisting others with their evaluation. Although they could argue that it is not their primary role, they should have been able to support schools in the process of developing their own evaluation processes and also to work with teachers to help them take their new knowledge, skills and attitudes and apply them within their own context. It is necessary to do this if teachers are going to make a difference and improve the learning of their students.

## Discussion and implications

The key outcomes sought from this ASB/APPA Travelling Fellowship were to explore what makes professional development effective and how organisations are evaluating its impact on student learning outcomes. From a review of the literature, and through discussion with academics in this field, there are ways in which this process can take place, and yet in practice there is little evaluation happening. Unfortunately, evaluating professional development seems to be a low priority for most organisations and schools that I visited. I spoke with many principals and leaders who were sceptical about evaluating professional development and there were very few situations where it was embedded as part of the culture.



This discussion will begin by re-visiting the original research questions that were used as a basis for the fellowship. These will then be briefly discussed and linked to some of the literature in this area. The final section will focus on recommendations for principals that may help in improving their student learning through their professional development programmes.

The following questions were posed:

- What type of professional development are you (schools) involved in?
- Who is providing the professional development - external organisations or staff within the school?

All the schools were heavily involved in a wide range of professional development options. Most of the principals had a strong belief that teachers were the key to improving student learning and that professional development was necessary to keep teachers up to date with the changing face of education. Teachers were engaged in on-site courses and training, they attended a wide range of development centres and courses, they were keen to participate in conferences particularly in Canada and the United States and were usually happy to receive government-funded support for staff learning. There were a few cases where learning communities were operating in school and these tended to be in schools that were a part of a partnership or cluster programme. Some of the principals were unsure of how their particular professional development emphasis was currently going and most spoke of their own development as a leader being different and often separate from that of the teachers.

- How is the professional development evaluated? How do the participants perceive the development and is it independently evaluated?
- Do schools and professional development providers have evidence that shows that it is making a difference to student learning?

There were very few cases where anyone could provide formal evidence to show that the professional development was improving student learning outcomes. One principal who was attending the NCSL Programme was involved in a research project using his own school. He was endeavouring to link student improvement in



Mathematics to the school's current CPD and had collected data using the results from the National Testing programme. The difficulty he was facing was that the test initially used was not readily available and therefore re-testing using a similar method was impossible. He had decided to use an unrelated assessment tool and was therefore questioning the results. In Canada, most data tended to be collected by the School District Leaders and once again this was not shared at the school level. Some leaders were asking for this information as they were keen to begin looking into links between teacher learning and student improvement. The fact that this data was collected and held by the school district superintendants was a major impediment to the process of effective evaluation.

There were only two providers of development that I visited who had collected data on students' learning and were able to show results. They were working to improve student literacy levels and had collected data from a range of schools. They had funding from the Government under the "Every Child Matters" agenda to work with schools over a two year period and were using student learning progress as a means of evaluating their success and meeting their centre's output targets. When I visited them, the data was purely for their use and not intended to be used or shared with the teachers or the schools. The centre was in a multi-cultural, low socio-economic area and the students were struggling with learning, social and emotional issues. At the other centres where time and effort were less consumed with social and economic issues, they had begun to look at evidence and data as a form of professional development evaluation.

- How does this professional development relate to the criteria found in the literature that documents successful professional development in terms of improved student outcomes?
- Are professional development and its evaluation the subjects of on-going academic research?

There is a wide range of research emerging in this area and the Iterative BES Programme in New Zealand is at the "forefront of a wave of activity that is dramatically altering the reform landscape by linking research to policy and practice" (forward to BES – Dr Lorna Earl). There is a need for teachers and leaders to understand the complexity of this area and to develop solutions for the future. It is the teachers who work directly with students and who have an impact on the success of their learning. We are fortunate to have this research, which is rigorous, comprehensive and accessible to teachers and principals.

- Does the professional development emphasis relate to Government driven and/or funded initiatives?

In most countries that I visited, the Government's area of focus or achievement initiatives were the basis for the funding and direction of school professional development. In the UK the Government was launching their 3Rs catch-up support for primary pupils: Every Child a Writer, a Reader and Every Child Counts. They were investing £144 million over the next three years into rolling out national programmes to ensure that every teacher uses the best teaching methods possible. In British Columbia, Canada, their Provenance emphasis is on improving literacy rates for the whole family. They have also targeted a healthy schools program and have an emphasis on aboriginal student learning.

Schools in Sweden, Finland and New Zealand and their professional development organisations appeared to have more autonomy, and although government initiatives were still known and often

targeted, the schools appeared to have more say in the form and delivery of professional learning for their teachers.

It is hoped that these findings will be used to guide leadership practice and policy, and to encourage further research to address concerns about developing effective professional development for our schools that engages teachers in learning that is linked to students' learning needs. These observations may provide a starting point for dialogue with diverse audiences about the future of professional development and its evaluation in terms of improving student outcomes.



Fortunately this topic is at the forefront of current educational research and dialogue at all levels. Every country that I visited spoke of the need for more work in this area. The British Government has recently formed a high level policy group representing all education sectors to investigate the importance and effectiveness of professional development for teachers. Sweden and Finland have a strong vision for a world class education system and believe that their teachers are the key to this success. They support them with a high level of professional development and expect them to be involved in ongoing learning. In New Zealand we have the findings of the Iterative Best Evidence Syntheses which give us sound guidance and advice on which to base professional learning in schools, however “professional learning that makes a difference for students is hard work and demands strong policy support and professional determination” (H. Timperley et al., 2007 ).

This travelling fellowship has given me the opportunity to seek out, view, discuss and attempt to analyse a wide range of professional learning opportunities in several countries. By investigating what is happening in practice and the constraints or limitations that are espoused by leaders, practitioners and providers, and by comparing these to the literature I now have a relatively thorough understanding of the issues and some of the possible solutions.

## **Recommendations**

Throughout this travelling fellowship, Professional Development has been cited globally as the most important factor in improving student learning outcomes. It is an essential part of any change process in education. "Opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning and development can have a substantial impact on student learning" (H. Timperley et al., 2007 )

The research clearly states that Principal Leadership holds a key role in student achievement and that one of the main contributors to a school's sustained success in raising student achievement is the principal's involvement. This needs to be achieved through developing leading teachers and supporting and enhancing the learning process through a whole school effectiveness and improvement model. It is from this belief that the following recommendations are made:

### **As principals:**

**We need to be visionary leaders always focussing on improving the learning outcomes of our students.** To do this we must:

- Espouse our vision to staff, community and students
- Embed the vision in everything we do

### **We need to be involved in distributing leadership – the distribution of cognitive knowledge.**

- *"The analysis showed that leadership of the improvement of learning and teaching is highly distributed in terms of both who leads and how it is enacted. Such leadership is embedded in school routines that are aligned to improvement goals, and involves the use of smart tools that are designed to assist teachers' learning of more effective pedagogical practices." (H. Timperley et al., 2007 )*

### **We must plan to evaluate all professional development in terms of improvements to student learning**

- Evaluation needs to be a deliberate and integral part of the process from the beginning, and need to be data/evidence based

### **We must be the leaders of the learning and be actively involved in the professional development in the school and assist staff to contextualise their learning and we need to put in place organisational support.**

To do this we must:

- Lead teachers and talk about their ongoing learning journey
- Develop strong learning communities that are more than tasks and teamwork
- Ensure that professional development is focused on teaching and learning
- Link what teachers do with what students need to learn
- Coach and support staff while they wrestle to transfer their new understandings and knowledge into practice

**We must address excuses and develop systems that work.**

- Despite protestation, it is possible

**The wider educational community needs to:**

**Develop a more cohesive approach to professional learning and look to establish a world class education/leadership centre that is linked to an accredited university programme.**

- *“The structuring of in-service professional development programs also reflects a trend toward a closer collaboration between university and districts (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005)*

**Continue to support research and development in the area of professional development learning.**

- Implement the findings of the research such as the BES
- Assist as practitioners with ongoing research in this area.

## Appendix i

# Educational Visits and Conferences

Major contributors to this report:

Professor Thomas Guskey  
Professor Helen Timperley  
Professor Viviane Robinson  
Professor Michael Fullan  
Dr Ian Terrell - Mindwheb Middlesex University  
Professor Guy Claxton  
David Eddy

### **Leadership and professional development organisations**

National College School Leadership Nottingham United Kingdom  
London Leadership Centre  
Middlesex University  
School Leadership Centre at University of British Columbia  
Haringay School District Development

### **Conferences Attended**

"The Leading Edge" International Confederation Principals, Auckland, New Zealand. 2 -5 April, 2007.

"Seizing Success" Annual Leadership Conference National College School Leadership Birmingham, UK. 6 – 8 June, 2007.

Curious Minds Think and Learn by Exploring the Unknown 13<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thinking Norrkoping, Sweden. 17 – 21 June, 2007

Extending High Standards Across Schools National Conference, Wellington New Zealand. 23 – 24 July, 2007.

Lead by Example 2007 Summer Leadership Conference British Columbia Canada. 19 - 21 August, 2007.

New Imagery for Schools and Schooling: Challenging, Creating, and Connecting, ASCD Sydney Australia. 10 – 12 October, 2007.

### **School Visits**

Donnington School – London  
Chisel Educational Partnership Schools – London  
Kyabram Secondary College Partnership – Melbourne  
EHSAS Cluster - Ashurst School, Roslyn School, North St School – Manawatu  
Red Beach School – Whangaparoa  
School District 54 – British Columbia  
Ministry of Education British Columbia  
Ministry of Education – UK



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