The Essential Guide to Professional Learning: Evaluation

The *Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders* (the PL Charter) describes the characteristics of a high quality professional learning culture and of effective professional learning. The Essential Guide to Professional Learning series unpacks the research behind key themes of the PL Charter.

This issue of the Essential Guide series expands on effective evaluation of professional learning.

The questions below are intended as a guide to assist you in making sure your evaluation of professional learning has clear goals for improvement, gathers the most useful and reliable data, is timed appropriately and provides clear and useful results.

You will know your evaluation of professional learning has been successful when:

- is the result of self and collegial reflection framed by the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST)
- it aligns with the aims of the school's learning and teaching culture as framed by the Australian Professional Standard for Principals
- data from the evaluation inspires and sustains a culture of learning within the organisation (APST Standard 6, focus area 6.4)
- teachers and leaders are active participants and designers of their professional learning
- the evidence of change collected inspires teachers and leaders to set new goals and undertake further learning
- teachers and leaders can articulate how changes in their practice are impacting on student achievement, engagement and wellbeing.

Is the evaluation of professional learning driven by clear and measurable goals for improvement?

- What changes do you wish to see in:
  - student outcomes
  - teacher and/or school leader skills, knowledge and practices?
- How are teachers actively engaged in the design and implementation of the evaluation of professional learning?
- What will be the indicators of success in the:
  - short term
  - medium term
  - long term?

How will you determine which qualitative and quantitative data will be gathered for the evaluation of professional learning?

- What is the purpose of the evaluation?
- Who will be the audience for the results?
- How will the results be used?
- How are teachers involved in the analysis and reporting of the results?
- What combination of data will give the most reliable evaluation?
- How will impacts on student achievement, engagement and/ or wellbeing be demonstrated?

When will the evaluation of professional learning take place?

- When will initial impressions about the professional learning and changes in thinking be gathered?
- When can you expect to see an impact?
  - How long do teachers need to work with the idea before it can be put into practice effectively?
  - How long will the changes need to be in place before there will be detectable improvements in student outcomes?
  - When will it be an appropriate time to re-evaluate the sustained impact of the professional learning?

How will the results of evaluations be used to inform ongoing planning for professional learning?

- Was the evaluation of the professional learning built into the program from the start?
- Are there opportunities to adjust the implementation of the professional learning plan in response to findings?
- How will the final summative evaluations be used to inform future planning?

Just as teachers plan carefully and make ongoing assessments of student learning as an integral part of the instructional process, they need to make evaluation an integral part of their own professional development process (Guskey, 2000).

The rationale for evaluation

Effective professional learning should support teachers and school leaders to reflect on, question and deliberately improve their learning and teaching practice.

Teachers and school leaders need to assess the effectiveness of their professional learning programs in order to improve the quality of future professional learning. Teacher and leader professional development should be evaluated ultimately for its impact on student achievement, engagement and wellbeing.

The principle of continuous learning supported by a collegial culture within the school underpins the construction of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST, p.2). The principle is reaffirmed in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals, specifically in the practice 'developing self and others' (APSP, p.9).

> *Many systems invest significant sums in professional development programs but do so as a habit, tending to offer the same set of training courses each year without regard for how they might fit into a comprehensive program or how effective they are – even when teachers complain that some of the courses are not useful (Jayaram et.al. McKinsey 2012).*

Effective evaluation design

Evaluations of professional development programs often focus on superficial issues (sometimes called the "happiness quotient") rather than on the substantive impact on teacher practice and student learning. In contrast, a comprehensive evaluation design provides a basis for understanding the participants' perception of the professional development activity, the usefulness and relevance of the activity, and the long-term effects of the activity (Cook & Fine, 1997).

It is important that evaluation:

- is built into programs from the start
- evaluates outcomes at multiple levels
- focuses on changes in teacher and leader practice leading to improved student outcomes
- tracks change over the short, medium and long term.

Evaluation of professional learning is an essential part of sustaining an effective learning and teaching culture.

Evaluation must be seen as an ongoing process that is initiated in the earliest stages of program planning and continued beyond program completion (Cook & Fine, 1997). Evaluations should be planned before the professional learning takes place, should proceed during the learning and implementation, and should be followed up after there has been time for the initiative to have an impact on student outcomes.

Good evaluations can provide sound, useful, and sufficiently reliable information that can be used to make thoughtful and responsible decisions about ongoing professional development processes and the ultimate effects of those programs (Guskey, 2000). It is also important to evaluate the evaluation process to determine its effectiveness, reliability and ongoing value.

Examples of effective data collection methods

When seeking to evaluate the impact of professional learning on the organisation, the individual, and on student outcomes, you should select an appropriate combination of methods to collect data:

- student perception surveys
- analysis of student behaviour and wellbeing indicators
- student learning gains
- interviews with a range of stakeholders
- parent surveys
- teacher self-reflection surveys
- journals or logs
- pen and paper assessment
- classroom observations
- video analysis of lessons
- teacher portfolio
- reviews of unit planning, assessment plans and teaching materials
- review of classroom environment
- analysis of teacher appraisal records
- questionnaires
- social media comments and discussion
- structured interviews
- focus groups
- case studies
- action research

What is your current approach to evaluating professional learning and is it working well? What new strategies for evaluating professional learning might you try?

Effective evaluation of professional learning

When undertaking evaluation of professional learning to assess whether it makes a difference for educators and students, you should use multiple strategies to measure the impact of that professional learning. Importantly, by measuring the impact from multiple points of view, you will produce useful and practical results.

Look for:

- measurable improvement
- achievement, engagement, wellbeing indicators
- intended and actual outcomes

Look for:

- culture of professional learning
- common goals for improvement
- support for learning
- sustained development and change

Impact on students

Purpose and guide for evaluation

determines

Impact on organisation

determines

Evaluation to improve professional learning program

Sustained impact

when results are shared

what is measured

how results are made available

Evaluation of professional learning outcomes

how is it measured

who does the measuring

when is it measured

Impact on individual practitioner

Look for:

- reaction to professional learning
- changes in thinking
- quality of learning
- underlying beliefs
- classroom practice
- use of new skills and knowledge
- evidence of growth
- progress in meeting personal learning needs and goals

Evaluation in Action

Mary was reviewing individual teachers' analysis of the school's goals for improving student learning. Her teachers had undertaken this analysis using data from their own students. Notable improvements in student attendance and engagement in lessons were clear. However, goals for improved literacy (especially reading comprehension) were more problematic.

Some professional learning on students' interpretations of text had taken place, and teachers' survey responses indicated the workshop had been engaging and useful.

Mary could arrange more workshops for her staff but she knew that more professional learning does not always lead to improved outcomes for students. She decided to be more strategic and tailor the professional learning to produce the most benefit. Mary arranged for more time for her teachers to collaboratively plan lessons and trial new strategies.

Her staff had drafted an evaluation plan to assess the impact of the professional learning as part of the overall plan for its delivery. This included structured professional conversations between faculty leaders and teachers. These conversations indicated that most staff had a strong understanding of the theory behind reading comprehension and practical ideas for applying this in their classrooms.

Mary knew it was too early in the improvement cycle to assess the impact of the new teaching strategies on student outcomes. However, it was the right time to evaluate whether the teachers had translated their new knowledge and skills into changed classroom practice.

Staff knew they would get more reliable data about the implementation of new ideas if each teacher was observed by more than one colleague. Mary arranged for a peer and the faculty leader to undertake the observations, and she set aside time for this activity in the coming weeks.

As the year unfolded teachers became more confident in implementing their new strategies. Data from the classroom observations was shared with individual teachers and collated to give an overall picture of the use of the teaching strategies.

Mary arranged for teachers from each year level and faculty to share this collated data more broadly with staff. The resulting conversations inspired others to trial new ideas and strategies.

Arrangements for classroom observations and collaborative planning were adjusted in response to teachers' feedback about the quality of the advice they were receiving from their peer observers.

Timing matters

It is important to design the evaluation process as an integral part of a professional learning initiative. Teachers and leaders should both be involved in defining an evaluation which has measurable objectives, a clear purpose and a target audience.

An evaluation should take into account multiple factors including:
- whether the professional learning program design was suitable to produce the intended results
- when impacts can realistically be expected to be observed
- the best methods to measure the intended results
- who will use the outcomes from the evaluation and what information will be most useful to them.

Timing is one of the most interesting methodological issues involved in evaluating the impact of professional development, particularly on students' achievement (Meiers & Buckley 2009). Evaluation of a professional development activity often consists of an evaluation form filled out at the end of the activity. Such timing does not allow for deep comprehensive, reflective feedback.

To ensure programs are valuable, participants' feedback and comments should be collected at intervals during the program and used in its continual refinement (Cook & Fine 1997).

It is nearly impossible to link a single episode of professional learning to student learning; that event alone is insufficient to produce results for students or teachers. Ongoing learning and carefully timed evaluations are required to accurately assess the impact of any initiative over time (Killion 2003).

Some evaluation will be formative and used to improve the professional learning program while it is underway. Other evaluation will be completed at the end of the program and used to measure changes made to teacher practice, organisational change and changes to student learning, engagement and / or wellbeing.

The story continues...

Teachers had also kept reflection journals and assembled a portfolio of unit and lesson plans during the year. In professional conversations with their faculty heads, teachers were able to share their reflections about their strategies and changed practice throughout the year. Student writing samples, results from informal and formal assessment were also analysed for changes in students' ability to interpret the text accurately.

Teachers had co-constructed the design of the professional learning and its evaluation from the outset. Had it been effective? How would they use the final results? What should be continued next year? What might be done differently? This 'evaluation' of the evaluation would be the starting point for goal setting in the new school year.

One thing Mary was already planning to do differently was to spend more time assessing teachers' prior knowledge about how students learn literacy. Through the comprehensive evaluation of the professional learning program, Mary had become aware that this initial assessment would have improved the original professional learning design.

Continuous improvement

Changing teacher and leader practice is not a linear process. It is a continuous cycle that can include:
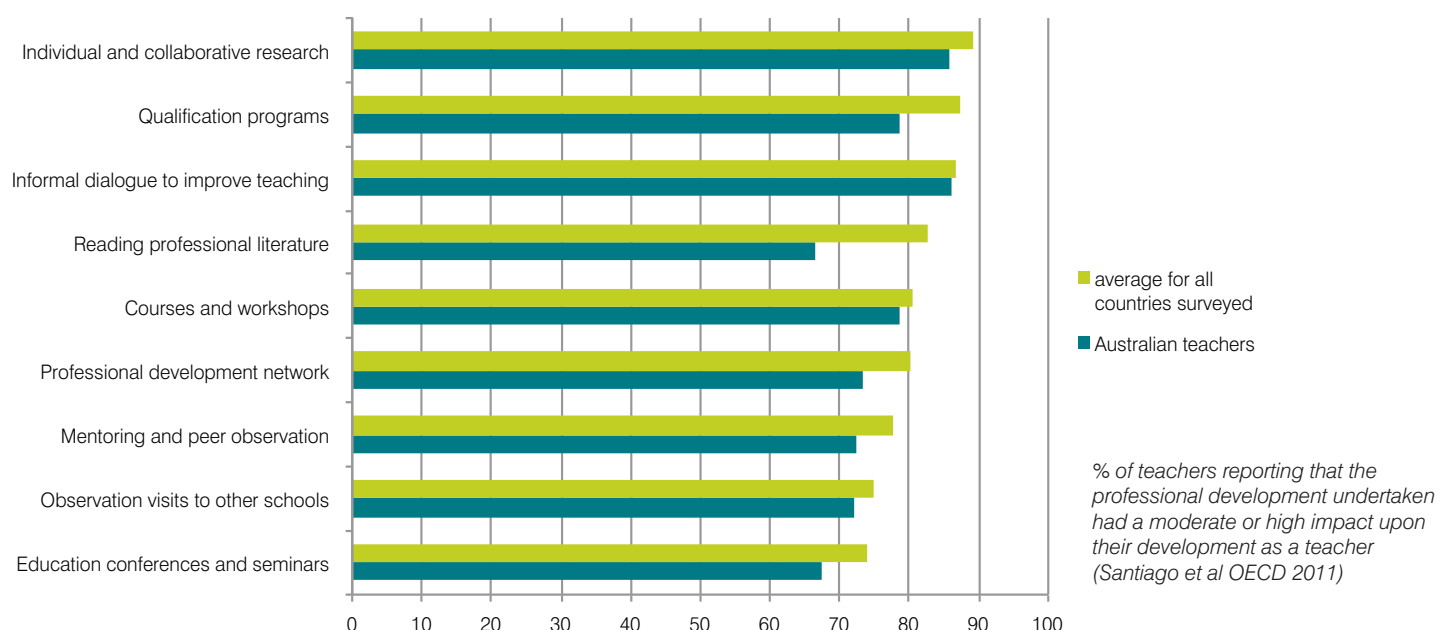
- active engagement with teachers as professionals in a collaborative setting and raising awareness about the goals for improvement (based on an analysis of current student outcomes)
- determining what is currently working well (and why)
- engaging with current teacher understandings and beliefs, and teachers' personal goals for improvement
- increasing teacher knowledge which includes the exploration of how and why the practice is likely to be more effective than what is being used currently
- application of the knowledge within planning and classroom practice through trying it out, then analysing successes and problem-solving issues that arise
- sharing of expertise, reflection and ongoing improvement of that practice.

The ultimate effectiveness of professional learning is defined in terms of evidence of better outcomes for students (Timperley 2011).

What types of professional learning do you use most often? Which professional learning experiences have had the greatest impact on your practice?

See what your fellow teachers had to say in a recent OECD report

Legend:
- average for all countries surveyed
- Australian teachers

% of teachers reporting that the professional development undertaken had a moderate or high impact upon their development as a teacher (Santiago et al OECD 2011)

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