

# The Teacher Education Landscape: Professional Learning and Development in Context



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## Introduction

Across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations, three key policy areas have been given priority in education: excellence, equity and inclusiveness. Central to achieving these goals is the provision and retention of quality teachers, particularly in priority schools (Schleicher, 2014). As a result, a substantial amount of policy has been directed at teacher education globally. Policy focuses on implementing professional standards, strengthening teacher education and certification requirements, increasing investments in induction, mentoring and professional development and transforming roles for teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010). As well, there is a growing focus on leadership professional development and its importance in the provision of quality schooling and student learning (Cranston, 2013). New Zealand is no exception.

The drivers for the focus on teacher education lie in the evidence base regarding the influence of quality teaching on student outcomes and concerns around teacher supply and retention (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Santiago, 2002). The education of teachers is one important way of achieving the globally espoused goals of improving schools, increasing teacher quality and improving student achievement outcomes (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Critically, school leaders influence the context within which teachers work and, as such, the quality of their practice (Robinson, 2007). There is evidence, for example, of the importance of school leaders in providing the necessary conditions for teacher professional learning through mentoring and coaching. These conditions include the development and maintenance of the necessary school culture and the implementation of appropriate policies and systems (Langdon & Ward, 2014). School leaders also have an important role to play in the development and maintenance of educational partnerships with their communities (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009).

This paper is the first of three aimed at informing current discussion about teacher and school leader professional learning and development (PLD) in New Zealand schools, in particular targeted PLD. Its purpose is to position PLD within the wider context of the provision of quality teachers and school leaders across the New Zealand education system. We use the term PLD to refer specifically to centrally funded, targeted support for priority schools which is provided under contract to the Ministry of Education (Ministry) by a number of providers. It is one of the key policy levers the Ministry has for improving student outcomes through quality teaching and leadership.

These three papers focus on English medium PLD. However, we acknowledge the Māori medium perspective and its importance in supporting the attainment of the educational goals of the government.

The education landscape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is complex and challenging. PLD is only one form of teacher development that occurs within and outside schools to enable teachers and school leaders to better meet these challenges. It is important to take account of this when considering the efficacy of PLD in supporting the attainment of the government's educational goals.

## Education In The 21st Century

Many current challenges and opportunities have not been experienced before. Any initiatives aimed at enhancing teacher and school leader quality are being implemented within a system also undergoing rapid change. There is an expectation of increased accountability, often based on student achievement data. There is also an expectation that learning will be more personalised, that the needs of an increasingly diverse student population will be met, that new technologies will be utilised in the classroom and that family, whānau and the community will be fully engaged in education. As well, the development of culturally responsive practices is seen as critically important in recognising the cultural diversity of learners and the wider communities within which schools operate.

All of this is occurring in a world where communities are better informed and more diverse than ever before and their expectations of the education system are often higher. The world beyond the school gates has changed and there is an expectation that schools will also change. However, there is doubt about the extent to which schooling has changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the extent to which the affordances of digital technologies have changed the way students experience learning, or whether learning has become more personalised, schools more inclusive or communities more involved. Rather, we simply wish to flag that any PLD has to take into account the challenges and opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the expectations and possibilities for innovative and inclusive education.

PLD that simply adds new technical knowledge will not be enough to achieve fundamental changes to the “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). Teachers need to “rethink how they are as a teacher...to re-situate themselves professionally” (Bull & Gilbert, 2012, p. 6). The discourse of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning literature positions the traditional role of the teacher as that of a “learner coach”. As a result, teachers need to not only expand what they know; they also need to understand how they know (Bull & Gilbert, 2012).

Changes are also required of school leaders as they reconsider their role in the light of the research regarding effective leadership practices and quality teaching. Effective educational leadership requires not only in-depth knowledge of teaching and learning but also knowledge of the importance of educational partnerships and how to foster these when a community culture can be very different to that of the school. School leaders must be able to develop and sustain professional relationships which promote inquiry and reflection (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009).

## Promoting Teacher and Leader Excellence Through Multiple Levers

High performing education systems which have low between-school variation as evidenced in tests administered through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), generally manage to attract and retain teachers equitably across their system (Schleicher, 2014). This requires more than effective PLD though it is a critical part of an equation.

## A Curriculum for Educators

Darling-Hammond (2010) argues that in order for the teaching profession to progress there needs to be agreement about what teachers should learn and how they should learn it. Many would argue there is already a consensus about the design elements of programmes that maximise teacher learning (Hill, Beisiegel, & Jacob, 2013). These are evident for example, in the Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) for Teacher Professional Learning and Development (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007), which has informed the provision of PLD in New Zealand since its publication. These elements include a focus on improving student achievement, the use of data and evidence, an inquiry based approach which is embedded in the everyday practice of educators, the use of research to inform practice, as well as professional collaboration.

However, there is evidence to suggest that even where these elements are present, teacher learning does not always occur and, at times, the results can be disappointing. Conversely, teacher learning has also been shown to occur even when these elements are not present (Hill, Beisiegel, & Jacob, 2013; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). The reasons for these apparently conflicting results may be a lack of consideration of the complexity of teacher education. Simple causal models which assume that when certain elements are present the desired outcomes will eventuate, may not allow for this complexity. Nor do they allow for variation in individual attributes, beliefs and experiences.

Coolahan (2002) argues that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, teachers must be self-reliant lifelong learners. This learning occurs across initial teacher education, induction and in-service learning. All three need to be considered as part of a continuum of teacher and school leader development (Fulton, Yoon, & Lee, 2005; Turley, Powers, & Nakai, 2006). There are strong arguments for a consistent and coherent curriculum across these three phases of teacher education (Ward, Grudnoff, Brooker, & Simpson, 2013). This should be part of the wider conceptual thinking surrounding PLD in general.

## The provision of motivating learning pathways for all educators

Schleicher (2014) provides a set of “pointers” for policy and practice in order to achieve equity in the provision of quality teachers across education systems. These include policy related to each of the three stages above. Amongst his options were career pathways, mentoring and the education of teacher educators. We would also include the development of PLD facilitators as well as relevant Ministry of Education personnel.

## The New Zealand Policy Landscape

Such priorities have resonance with the focus on priority schools discussed earlier, and the need to increase equity. A second priority is to maximise the contribution of education to the economy. The three Better Public Service Targets are related to participation levels in early childhood education (which is seen as a key lever for later success) and improved achievement rates at both NCEA level 2 and NCEA level 4 or above. The second of these targets is for 85% of 18 year olds to have achieved at NCEA level 2 or equivalent in 2017. Given that PISA results consistently show that New Zealand has a large tail of underachievement, this will require a substantial lift in the achievement of priority learners.

The policy focus in New Zealand is on continuous improvement across the education system and a movement towards high equity and high performance (excellence). The government's stated goal is to raise student achievement through a system-wide approach (Ministry of Education, August, 2010). Teacher and leader quality is key to achieving this outcome, supported by strong community relationships.

Among the strategies for improvement is the commitment by the Ministry to support schools and teachers to lift achievement and to measure educational achievement to enable improvement. This is to be achieved primarily through a targeted and integrated model of PLD. However, there are also a number of other initiatives across the education system, summarised below, which are aimed at improving student achievement.

### Provision of information, research and evidence

There are two key areas of information needed to improve the system. The first involves developing a base of research informed evidence and making it available to support decision making at all levels. The second involves creating achievement metrics that can provide a dynamic, national picture of achievement which can be disaggregated. Ensuring that all of this information is accessible enough to inform stakeholder decision making is at the heart of policy attempts to raise achievement.

Underpinning the mechanics and design of improved system performance is the BES programme which has provided an evidence base and rationale for building the capability of leaders, teachers as well as community relationships. Ten principles for effective professional learning are identified in the BES for *Teacher Professional Learning and Development* and these inform the design of all PLD. Other relevant BES include the Leadership BES (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009) and the Family and Community BES (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003). The BES Programme has identified "*the how and why of what works, with a particular emphasis on what makes a bigger difference for priority groups of students*". These messages are reiterated across the system and in all areas of policy. The BES scholarship provides "*empirically tested models for the core of instructional practice*" (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Critical to the engagement and capability of schools and communities is the availability of student achievement data. The Public Achievement Information (PAI) website includes information about how New Zealand's education system is progressing at national, regional and local levels. It is available to the general public with the aim of improving transparency and promoting the effective use of student achievement information. Programmes are being implemented to support the development of the necessary capability.

### Maintaining Quality PLD provision

The current approach to ensuring quality provision of centrally funded PLD relies on the competitive tendering and contracting processes undertaken by the Ministry which purchases PLD services on behalf of schools.

Selection criteria for centrally funded professional support have been informed by the BES as well as effective programmes such as the Literacy Professional Development Project (LPDP), Te Kotahitanga and the Assess to Learn (AtoL) project. The In-Service Teacher Educators' Project 2006-2007 (INSTEP) also had a major influence on how educators and policy makers constructed PLD.

In 2010, PLD provision was re-designed to make the provision more contestable and to better target schools with high proportions of priority learners. Changes included: removing funding to universities by disestablishing the School Support Services contract held by the universities and making the provision contestable amongst a range of providers, including independent companies and the universities. The Ministry sought "*high quality, culturally-responsive providers, who exemplify the principles of effective teacher professional learning and development practice*".[1] The Ministry of Education also encouraged providers to engage with iwi, leading to both partnerships with iwi and iwi led partnerships.

### Managing Access to PLD provision

Prior to 2011, schools accessed centrally funded PLD by applying to providers which then selected schools using criteria agreed with the Ministry. PLD is now delivered as part of an "*integrated system of support for learners and schools*"[2].

PLD is focussed on: building the capability of schools for continuous improvement; accelerating the progress of students who are currently under-served by the system to ensure attainment of worthwhile qualifications; embedding the identity, language and culture of Māori students and their whānau into PLD and teacher practice so that Māori achieve educational success as Māori; accelerating achievement for Pasifika students; increasing progress for students with special education needs; supporting leaders and teachers to make significant improvements in students outcomes represented in The New Zealand Curriculum and Te Marautanga o Aotearoa, particularly in numeracy and literacy.

This has led to an increased role for regional Ministry offices with senior advisers now overseeing PLD allocation and brokering the support, using the school's achievement data and other information to determine which schools would benefit most from which resource. A Student Achievement Function (SAF) has also been introduced to work alongside senior advisers, operating out of regional Ministry offices. Schools can also self-identify for PLD support through the *Curriculum Online* website.

Three key strategies guide the Ministry's work in improving outcomes for priority learners: Ka Hikitia – Accelerating Success 2013-2017; the Pasifika Education Plan; Success for All – Every School, Every Child. These strategies are designed to demonstrate how all schools, PLD facilitators and regional Ministry personnel can contribute to improved outcomes.

In addition to these initiatives, there was an increased desire to ensure that with the range of PLD and other support available to schools, such as supplementary support for students, there was overall coherence to the support schools could access through a national Quality Improvement Framework.

## Regulation of PLD Provision

Under National Administration Guideline, each Board of Trustees is required to promote high levels of staff performance and the Registered Teacher Criteria require teachers to demonstrate commitment to ongoing professional learning and the development of personal professional practice. There are currently no regulations about the supply of teacher professional development nor the standards professional development providers should meet.

The recent creation of the Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (EDUCANZ), a new professional body for teachers, and Investing in Educational Success (IES) are other initiatives aimed at strengthening the profession. IES includes the development of communities of schools, the introduction of new professional leadership roles within and across schools for both principals and teachers and the provision of inquiry time to enable professional collaboration across communities of schools. A teacher led innovation fund is also being established. The purpose is to provide opportunities for teachers to advance their careers in the classroom and to embed a system-wide means of sharing expertise across schools.

## PLD Funding

PLD is currently mainly funded through “in kind” resourcing where the regional Ministry provides PLD “free” to schools through centrally contracted providers. Schools are also increasingly funding PLD through their operations grants. In the past, schools and clusters could also develop proposals and apply to Ministry funding pools such as Extending High Standards Across Schools (EHSAS), and literacy and numeracy funding pools.

## Conclusion

PLD is a central policy lever that government designs and funds to deliver on its goals and implement policies in the schooling sector but it is not the only policy lever for ensuring quality teaching and leadership in New Zealand schools. A raft of other government initiatives are also aimed at raising student achievement.

There is general consensus about the elements of effective professional learning. Understanding how these elements interact and how their influence is moderated by the context within which they are implemented is more problematic. Even where all the elements of effective PLD are present, the outcomes can be influenced by the extent to which other levers have also been implemented.

The various PLD models and intervention initiatives supported by the New Zealand government are underpinned by the international literature and are based on the empirical evidence provided in the BES series and New Zealand schooling improvement research. However, putting theory into practice is not always straightforward in schools operating in diverse socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and geographic contexts. The measurement of the success - or lack of it - is also complex. There is evidence to suggest that even where PLD is implemented according to the principles espoused in the literature, there are not always the desired outcomes in terms of either equity for some students from minority backgrounds or consistent gains in student outcomes within and across schools. The strengths and weaknesses of interventions and the way these are organised and structured are discussed in the next paper.

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[1] Quoted directly from the Professional Learning and Development overview.

[2] Information regarding this system can be accessed from: <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/System-of-support-incl.-PLD>