

Making our PLD effective!



How will we know if it is?

What should we be doing?

Effective professional learning and development (PLD) is essential if we are to have effective schools.

Few teachers would disagree with that statement, but how well do we do it? How can we tell?

There was a time in New Zealand when all PLD was arranged by the Ministry of Education. Then, around 1990, it was decided to decentralise PLD and to put it back to schools to organise for themselves. But schools had had almost no preparation for this role. When a team of researchers looked at how well schools were managing, they found a widespread lack of systematic organisation and planning as schools struggled with this unfamiliar role¹.

It might seem that in the years since matters will surely have improved. Yet as recently as 2014 another Ministry paper found that there could still be “limited knowledge in schools and kura about how best to design and implement effective PLD”.²

Are our schools now doing better than this? How will we know?

First, we need to gather some data, to give us a baseline for assessing current practice and then planning forward.

To do this for your school, what PLD records can you find for the last three years?

- *Who* was it for? (eg, was it targeted to any specific group? Can you see whether every staff member had access to some PLD at some stage?)
- What *topics* were covered? *Why* were these topics chosen – is any rationale recorded?
- What *delivery formats* were used?
- Who took responsibility for *organising* PLD? Is that known?
- How was the PLD *evaluated* at the time? (*Was* the PLD evaluated?)
- Looking at your school now, have there been any long-term outcomes from that PLD?

(What if you can't find any records? Don't worry – you've got a clean page to work from!)

Let's now take a look at your findings and at what the research team found, and see what can be learned from comparing the two.

¹ Auckland Facilitation Team (1991) *Achieving Charter Curriculum Objectives: Final Report to Ministry*. Auckland College of Education.

² MoE Professional Development Advisory Group, 2014, *A NEW approach to centrally funded PLD: Conversations with the profession*, p.6.

[1] Who was it for?

Your findings:

- Was it targeted to any specific group?
- Was it ever across the board for the whole staff?
- Can you see whether every staff member had access to some PLD at some stage?



The research:

In their research, the Auckland Facilitation Team [the AF Team] found firstly that PLD was very largely directed towards the teaching staff. They were surprised to find that the following people were usually *not* included in PLD planning or provision:



- the principal
- the management team
- the BOT
- the support staff

Yet all of these people have specific areas of skill outside those of the classroom teacher. Omitting this group means leaving out the structural support that needs to be there to support the teaching staff.

- For example, in addition to leadership, organisational and decision-making skills, there are also specific areas of knowledge your principal and management team may need to acquire, such as changes in the official education regulations.
 - For example, how many principals and school managements know about the 2005 change in the regulations which made catering for gifted learners mandatory? Experience suggests very few!
- The BoT needs to understand how a school works – not just the technical parts, but the important inter-relationships that weave it all together.
 - One BoT member in one very large high school thought it acceptable to refer to students as “units of production”, revealing more than he knew about how well aligned he was (or wasn’t) with the purposes of the school. In that school, despite its size, there was virtually no interaction between staff and BoT.
- The support staff bring important skills to their various roles. Recognising their right to PLD is not only necessary but also helps them to feel valued, not overlooked.



Were any of these people included in your school’s PLD in the past?

- Are all these people included now in your forward planning for PLD?
- Are there any others whom you would include? (For example, the Learning Support Coordinator?)
- What provision do you make for teachers joining your staff to catch up on any past PLD and its outcomes?

[2] How were PLD topics chosen?

Your findings:

- What topics were chosen?
- Is there any record of the rationale behind these choices?

The research:

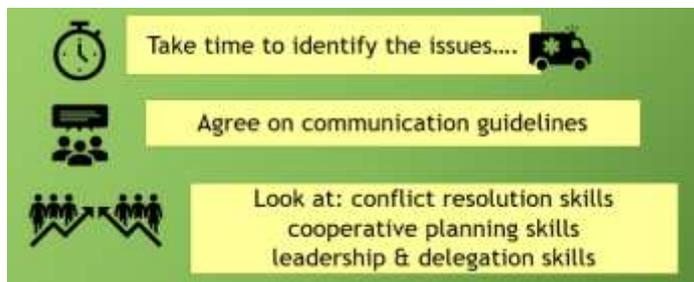
The AF Team found that PLD was largely (a) ad hoc and (b) curriculum-related.

By “ad hoc”, they meant that choices appeared often to be driven by external, temporary or relatively superficial reasons (“We haven’t done that for a while...”), rather than by any clear assessment of actual student and teacher needs. In fact, there was a widespread absence of any systematic needs analysis.

On the other hand, curriculum choices were, of course, entirely legitimate! But there are other important areas which need to be considered too.

- The most unexpected finding: people issues were not considered as a topic for PLD – yet people issues play a very significant part in making a school work effectively for all its members, staff, students and community.
 - Such issues included direct personality conflicts, someone using a senior position to block innovation, empire-building in departments/syndicates, a principal over-riding decisions made by other staff, teachers being reluctant to admit lack of required knowledge or skills, philosophical differences and differences in teaching styles that created tensions amongst staff, good intentions gone astray. (Any sound familiar???)
 - An actual example of philosophical differences: two teachers working in classrooms next to each other each found a boy who was cheating. One hauled the child out in front of the class and told his classmates he was a thief who had, by cheating, stolen marks that belonged to them. The other responded by asking how she had so failed the child that he was afraid to admit he didn’t know how to do the set work.
 - An actual example of good intentions: teachers were asked (a) how often do you *give* praise to your colleagues, and (b) how often do you *receive* praise from your colleagues. Answers: (a) almost 100%, (b) around 25%. The Great Missing Praise Hunt was launched! The finding: teachers failed to make their praising intention clear. For example, the principal “rewarded” her staff for good work by sending them off to workshops or courses – the staff thought she was sending them off because they were performing poorly!

Ways found to deal with these issues effectively included:



- Firstly, spending time to identify and clarify the issue
- A specific group agreeing on guidelines for communicating together
- Training for senior staff in facilitation skills
- Assistance from an outside facilitator who could view the issue objectively.
- Making people skills a focus for PLD, eg looking at:
 - communication skills & systems
 - cooperative working and planning
 - leadership and delegation skills

What about *Ministry priorities*? Yes, of course these are compulsory and sometimes outside what we ourselves might think of as a priority for our school.

But there's another view: a Ministry-set priority means we have an opportunity to explore a topic in depth while being Ministry funded and Ministry supported – that doesn't happen every week! Take under-achievement, for example. When this was a Ministry priority, some schools said that meant they didn't need to provide for gifted learners – yet research shows that gifted children are one of the groups at very high risk of underachievement. What else don't we know? Do we all really have a good handle on just why children under-achieve?

[3] *Who organised PLD in your school?*

Your findings:

- Did someone have this as a specific responsibility, or was it left to the principal? Or was it not clear who did this?
- What input did staff have into PLD decisions?
- Were good records kept of what PLD had been done, who was involved, and what the outcomes were?

The research:

In many schools, it seemed that there was no needs analysis, no clear forward planning and no specific system for selecting PLD topics. Staff input was often minimal, not asked for, or even ignored: the principal had the final say. In some schools, someone was named as PLD coordinator and was responsible for the organisation of PLD events; in others, organisation might simply be left to the person who suggested a topic.

The AF Team found that the organisation of PLD worked best when managed by a representative committee, not just one person, and that the following criteria were essential:

- there must be a specific allocation of responsibility for PLD
- effective organisation must involve good record-keeping
- selection of specific topics must be based on a careful needs analysis of staff, both collectively and individually, and of student needs, balanced with attention to any Ministry priorities at that time
- needs analysis should lead to the development of an action plan, both short-term and long-term, and should be linked to the school's vision and policy statements
- the action plan should ensure that any PLD uses sound research-based PLD strategies
- the action plan should provide for evaluation and review of outcomes for staff and students.

The role of the **principal** is crucial. His or her actions do much to determine whether PLD is seen as relevant by staff. He or she should:

- ensure that at all times he or she is well-informed about all aspects of PLD – who is doing what, what opportunities are available, what needs have been identified, etc
- always participate as fully as possible in PLD taking place within the school
- ensure administrative support is in place for all PLD
- ensure PLD is included in the annual budget and is reviewed regularly
- ensure the BOT is kept informed of PLD commitments and undertakings.



Two very important reminders for principals:

1. Please do NOT introduce a speaker to your staff and then immediately leave as you've "got too much waiting on your desk". *Nothing* could more clearly indicate to your staff that you don't think this PLD is really all that important or worth bothering about. If you think that, they will too.
2. Your job doesn't finish when the session is over. Whether it's a single workshop or a course, your role is to follow up with your staff – was the PLD valuable for them? Is there any follow-up they would like, anything they want to know more about, feel unsure about? Are there any changes the school should perhaps make in what it does now? If you have a staff member who has been away on a course or at a conference, is there material that could be shared with staff? And so on.

High schools: the AF Team noted that the organisation of PLD at high schools encountered some issues not generally found in primary schools, eg:

- sheer size means a much greater volume of work for the PLD committee
- subject specialisation makes it more difficult for the committee to achieve a good overview, eg:
 - are needs identified in one department needs which should be addressed schoolwide?
 - are departments unintentionally duplicating PLD activities?
 - are there shared needs which are falling between the gaps because no one department or person has specific overall responsibility for this area?

An example: In some high schools, there is a PLD committee – but it tends to be just the major departments which are represented on it. Music, dance, art, drama and sports teachers and other specialities are often not present, yet their staff need PLD too.

Thus PLD committees in high schools need to be widely representative, to have good links with HoDs or faculty heads, and to pay special attention to good communication with staff.

[4] What delivery formats were used for PLD?

Your findings:

- Did your school have an established pattern for PLD, eg a teacher-only day at the beginning of the year or at the beginning of each term?
- If so, how was this supplemented with other delivery formats?
- How often were outside facilitators used? How often did PLD use in-house delivery?

The research:

How PLD is delivered: this is possibly the most important question we need to consider, and the research is very clear about this.

Much depends on how we define what we mean by PLD. Learning Forward, an Oxford-based professional learning association for educators, offers a very detailed definition which includes the following statement:

The term "professional development" means activities that ... are sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day or short-term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven and classroom-focussed".

Our own Ministry agrees:

PLD should:

- involve the development of *deep content knowledge*;
- provide *multiple opportunities* to learn and practise in *real contexts* with support occurring over *an extended period of time*, with constant checking to ensure the opportunities are making *a real difference to learners*.
 - Extract from MoE, 2014, pp. 12-13."A NEW approach to centrally-funded PLD: Conversations with the profession. (My italics).

This has been summarised in a very powerful statement by Learning Forward's recently retired Executive Director, Stephanie Hirsh:

Training without follow-up is malpractice

Why does she make such a strong statement? She does so because that's what international research on teacher education supports, as in the following extract from the research of Joyce & Showers

Presentation: Transfer to classroom practice: 0%
Presentation + Practice: Transfer to classroom practice: 5%
Presentation + Practice + Feedback + Reflection:
Transfer to classroom practice: 99%

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(By "presentation" here, the reference is essentially to one-off activities).

How well does PLD in this country meet these criteria?

While other possibilities did exist, such as teachers being released to work with colleagues, the AF Team found that PLD activities were chiefly focussed on teacher-only days or on teachers being sent on courses or to conferences. After-school workshops were also popular. Anecdotally all of this appears to be still largely true.

That does not mean that these things are entirely without value. It means that they are not enough by themselves. Thus we need to think about ways in which we can better provide for this. For example:

- ensure the PLD committee knows about available in-depth courses relevant to the school's identified needs and ensure that at least one staff member (preferably more) enrolls for that course
- ensure any teacher attending such a course has opportunities to share learned skills and knowledge with other staff
- create in-house study groups to research particular topics or techniques
 - not usually considered: the possibility of using such study groups also to monitor resources, ensure all staff know what's there and how to use it, and also to find, demonstrate and evaluate new resources
- where funds might not otherwise permit, consider linking with another school or schools to bring in a top facilitator for a series of workshops rather than a one-off presentation

³ Published by the New York based United Federation of Teachers in their newsletter, April 27 2006, under the title "Professional Development to Support Student Achievement".

- use lesson-planning techniques to develop a “project” for the staff themselves, built round a particular topic or strategy relevant to teachers’ identified PLD needs – this could include one of those people issues mentioned earlier!

5. How do you find a facilitator?

Your findings:

- Have any records been kept of which facilitators have been used and of how satisfied staff were with their presentations?
- What are the school’s responsibilities in employing a facilitator? Does the school have any checklist to guide any new coordinator in finding and working with a facilitator?

What do experienced facilitators suggest?

- The Ministry has a PLD website which lists facilitators.
- Word of mouth remains probably the best guide, today of course helped by Facebook groups.
- Established facilitators usually have their own website. This can tell you about their qualifications and the range of their experience. It can be helpful to check their vision statements – do these align with your school’s vision?



And when you’ve found your facilitator:

- First of all, *be clear about your needs*.
 - For example: you want your facilitator to deliver a workshop on identifying gifted learners. He/she will need to know what your school currently does, so they can plan a workshop geared to what your school *doesn’t* have or know about.
- Then, *be clear about your arrangements*.
 - Have you discussed costs, equipment, resources, time required?
 - Have you discussed follow-up possibilities?

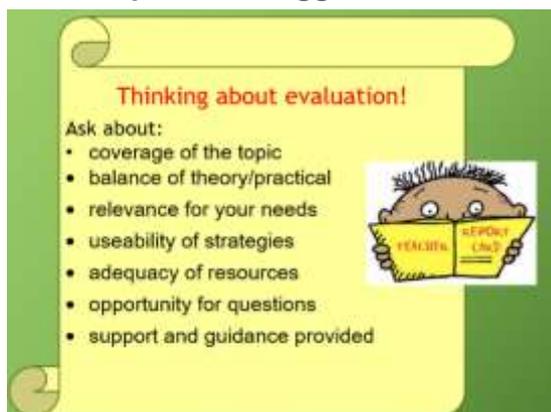
NB! Please do NOT tell your facilitator the PLD session will start at a specific time and then on the day spend the first 20 minutes discussing school business!

6. How do you evaluate PLD?

Your findings:

- Have records been kept of the evaluation of previous PLD sessions?
- Are these valuations reflected in your forward planning?

What experience suggests:



This is an example of a simple format which, in practice, has been found to cover all that you are likely to need to know in most situations.

You can of course add a rating scale for each point if you would like more detail.

You can also add an opportunity for people to add a comment if they feel so inclined.

Another often useful possibility is to ask staff to suggest “where to next”....

And that's what we're asking too!

7. Where to next?

When you've compared all the ideas above with your own collected data and with your own thoughts as you went through this material, then your next steps could well be these:

- If you don't already have one, form a PLD committee.
- Use the information from this paper and from your data to begin to create your action plan.
- Carry out a detailed needs analysis – individual staff, staff teams, school wide.
 - Remember you may need to do this in stages, over time.
- Implement – evaluate – review!

