

Professional Learning Teams (PLT's)

Dr Neville Johnson has had many years of experience, working with schools to provide a model for implementing school improvement and change. His notion of working in teams is explored as a means to re-culture schools and to build professional learning relationships.

Dr Johnson believes that productive teamwork in which teachers gain new knowledge about what they do and how students learn, has the power to change the culture of schools and make continuous learning and improvement not only possible, but manageable.

He believes that it is only through working in teams over time that we learn what makes them function effectively and in ways that both contribute to the goals of the school and are capable of being sustained. Dr Johnson's approach to effectively implementing change in schools includes setting up **professional action learning teams**.

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What is a Professional Learning Team?

- Small group of teachers sharing common interest in addressing learning and teaching challenges, and improving an aspect/s of their teaching practice
- PLT's are NOT administration and management teams. The focus of PLT's is on classroom pedagogy - improving student engagement, connectedness, achievement and outcomes through enhanced classroom instruction/practice
- They provide structural support for teachers and help to build positive collegial relationships
- PLT's focus on action enquiries to improve classroom teaching and student outcomes. Through activities such as -
 - collaborative examination of student work
 - reading and discussion of educational research
 - case discussions and reflection on classroom situations or issues
 - peer observation and feedback
- *Action enquiries is a fancy way of saying let's study what's happening at our school and in our classrooms and decide how to make it a better place for learning and learners*
- Action enquiries focus on real teaching/learning challenges teachers identify in daily teaching.

Why have Professional Learning Teams?

- PLT's support teachers with similar foci for improvement, to engage in collaborative discussion, reflection and support
- Allow teachers to develop and share expertise
- Functions of leadership are shared between all team members. Leaders in a PLT may -
 - act in the role of advocate, coach or mentor
 - model good practice
 - help with provision of resource materials
 - facilitate and make available research into effective teaching and learning

- Complements Performance and Development plans by promoting self-reflection and identification of professional learning needs
- PLT's use time for doing 'real work' rather than talking about what needs to be done

Why use an action enquiry?

- Teachers can -
 - identify an area of teaching practice they want to improve
 - investigate and plan activities
 - implement these in class
 - evaluate the impact on student learning and outcomes
- Teachers can -
 - reflect on their learning
 - develop fresh perspectives on existing knowledge
 - support and challenge each other
- Action based enquiries give teachers a reason to team up and engage in collective learning, to find more effective strategies and to enhance student outcomes.

How is the focus for improvement identified, and the enquiry scoped?

Information is gathered that will indicate the possible areas of focus of enquiry, such as:

- Specific Academic Learning Challenges: e.g. literacy and numeracy knowledge and skills
- Differentiating teaching and learning in mixed ability classrooms (Addressing diversity)
- Demonstrating deeper thinking and developing higher order thinking skills
- Making links/connections between Learning Areas, Stages of Schooling (Transition)
- Students managing their learning
- Attitudes and motivation to school and/or particular subjects
- Range of confidence, knowledge and skill in the use of the newer technologies
- Student self-directed learning and taking increased responsibility for learning
- Students learning how to think and learn (Habits of mind)
- Students cooperating and collaborating in their learning

The enquiry is stated in such a way that all staff in the PLT are agreed on the focus of their action.

An example of action based enquiries -

- Will the careful selection and use of explicit guided reading teaching strategies assist students to become more independent self-motivated and responsible readers?
- Will discussion and sharing of how we use big books help in our classroom planning and engagement of students?

- Will the sharing of ideas and resources of rich oral language tasks, increase our repertoire and teaching confidence in order to increase our children's verbal and written abilities?
- Will the sharing of our organisation and planning for the Numeracy block assist us to develop our Numeracy teaching skills and confidence, in order to lift student outcomes?
- Will using the Early Years Numeracy Interview results as a planning tool, allow us to create mathematical opportunities that cater to all individual needs?
- Will the use of higher order thinking strategies such as a Question Matrix and Key Thinking Tools result in deeper levels of thinking and comprehension skills in literacy?
- Will the implementation of a variety of new learning and teaching strategies that are meaningful, relevant and engaging increase student and teacher confidence in 'taking risks' in their learning and teaching ?
- Will the provision of a learning program, which incorporates 'rich authentic tasks' connected to the community engage students in learning and improve learning standards?
- Will the setting of assessment tasks that are 'rich' and seen as authentic in the eyes of the student, establish the classroom and curriculum conditions within which students are more likely to motivate themselves to want to learn at a deeper level?
- Will offering student's choice in the ways they can display what they have learnt (for example, through oral and written language, visual representation, dramatic forms) increase their sense of ownership of their learning and motivation to learn?
- Will the use of visual mapping techniques such as concept mapping and mind mapping, help students make links between concepts and connections with what they already know and develop deeper understanding?
- Will the more direct connection of assessment tasks to the day-to-day classroom learning activities, and the use of 'rubrics' to make explicit how students will demonstrate their learning, result in greater student and teacher clarity of what is to be learnt and consistency in teacher judgments when assessing learning?
- Will the use of classroom strategies and actions that involve students in such actions as:
 - monitoring their own learning
 - planning aspects of their own learning
 - learning to respond appropriately to feedback on learning
 - evaluating the effectiveness of their own learning
 Result in more self-regulated learning by students?

COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TEAMS

Action- Enquiry Projects provide purpose

Special and work based inquiries give professional action-learning teams a reason to work and learn together; to engage in an integrated, action learning enquiry approach to implementing carefully selected curriculum initiatives.

Collective responsibility

Learning teams increasingly assume collective responsibility for producing more effective learning for all students, regardless of who teaches them, while each team member maintains a commitment to individual accountability.

Teacher's professional learning

Professional action learning teams benefit from learning opportunities and professional support that is both embedded in the workplace and provided in outside settings.

Genuine collaboration

Learning teams develop norms of self reliance AND collaboration. They engage in 'deep' forms of collaboration that are more likely to lead to transfer of ideas into practice.

Support for teachers

Learning teams provide three frames of support -

Personal
Professional, and
Structural

Formal leadership

Learning teams require formal leaders who are knowledgeable, skilled and supportive, who emphasise and model the importance of staff learning and who act as co-ordinators, advocates and linkers.

Widespread leadership

In learning teams all members consider themselves to be leaders and change agents and distribute tasks and roles accordingly.

Attention to relationships

Successful learning teams address tensions inherent in the personal and professional relationships within the team. They engage in learning conversations to address these tensions and avoid embattled positions.

Make system demands on your own

Effective learning teams address external initiatives by linking them to internal, school identified challenges.

Expect difference

Professional action learning teams acknowledge their particular history, composition and dynamics. They implement change in ways and at rates different from one another.

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Thank you to Neville J. Johnson and his literature on 'Working in Teams' and 'Professional Learning Teams; Practical Considerations'.