Abstract

There is increasing recognition that traditional schooling models are failing many students throughout the world. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) Innovative Learning Environment (ILE) project involving 26 countries is highlighting transformative educational models through its research and case studies. The ILE research and analysis of innovative schools case studies has highlighted transformative approaches in terms of Learners, Teachers, Organisation of Learning and Pedagogy, Resources and Content. The current research has specifically examined international and South Australian literature studies about the changing teacher role and professional learning approaches within innovative environments. The research methods relevant to this paper are document search (including international and school-based materials and surveys), as well as leader interviews in selected sites. Results from South Australia and internationally indicate a changing role for teachers within innovative learning environments. Teacher professional learning is most effectively supported through working collaboratively over an extended timeframe in relevant groups focused on student artefacts and planning for learning, including through action research and in professional learning community teams. This paper provides a preliminary report about innovative practices and teacher professional learning approaches being utilised to support teachers and to build sustainable innovation.

Introduction

New technologies, globalisation, diverse family structures and the shift from industrial to knowledge-based economic structures reflect emergent economic, technological, political and social change, with education systems needing to undergo significant transformation to ensure young people and citizens thrive in the twenty-first century (Bentley, 2000; Leadbeater, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Istance, 2011; OECD, 2010, 2008; Dumont, Istance & Benavides, 2010; Cisco Systems Inc., 2010; Wyn, 2007; Eckersley, 2006; Roberts & Owen, 2012). While educational improvements are continuously implemented by education systems, there is increasing recognition that traditional schooling models are failing many students throughout the world. Results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) testing regarding 15 year olds in over 60 countries indicate that school systems are not very successful in preparing students for lifelong learning and the knowledge economy (OECD/CERI, 2008). Poor student engagement (Dunleavy & Milton, 2012) and insufficient focus on emotional and social development are also concerns (Slavin, 2010).

These excellence and equity concerns, together with emerging knowledge from learning sciences research, highlight the need for more significant educational transformations which go beyond mere ‘tinkering at the edges’ (Bentley, Daigle, Hutmacher, Shapiro & Ungerleider, 2006:189), with innovation being about ensuring ‘significant improvements in the efficiency, effectiveness or quality of outcomes’ (Australian National Audit Office [ANAO], 2009:1). Teaching within an innovative
education context also involves a changed role for teachers from ‘sage on the stage’ to ‘guide on the side’, with teachers responsible for ‘engineering’ the learning environment (Wiliam, in Dumont, Istance & Benavides, 2010). Significant professional learning is required to support teachers in building new skills.

The objectives of the current study are to investigate some of South Australia’s innovative schools in regard to the changing teacher role, professional learning approaches and impacts on students, within the broader context of the international Innovative Learning Environment research. This paper outlines some preliminary findings regarding innovative education and professional learning.

**Background**

The research is contextualised within the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) *Innovative Learning Environment* (ILE) project involving 26 countries. The OECD project, operating since 2009, has involved a research phase; identification and interrogation of practical case studies and sharing various systems approaches to implementation and change (OECD, 2011). The OECD research phase identified key characteristics of innovative contexts such as individualised approaches; the importance of collaborative learning and student engagement; the value of high expectations and challenge while also providing support; seeking connectedness across learning areas and highlighting formative assessment. Social, emotional and academic aspects are key focus areas within innovative contexts, with data collection being essential to provide information about effectiveness (OECD, 2011).

Additionally, the OECD analysis of innovative schools case studies has highlighted transformative educational approaches in terms of Learners, Content, Resources, Organisation of Learning and Teachers (OECD, 2011). More transformative innovation contexts show significant departure from traditional schooling models in several of these aspects. For example, in terms of Learners, students may be regrouped within multi-age learning groups to cater for their interests or for targeted skill building, with personalised learning plans frequently developed by individual students. Content may be interdisciplinary or focused on twenty-first century learning skills, student interest areas or values. Resources such as community, physical facilities and technology may be a significantly innovative feature. The Organisation of Learning may be the focus for innovation including flexible timing for structuring the school day or highlighting peer/self/formative assessment practices and the use of rubrics. Consistent with other research (Timperley, 2008; Wiliam, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006), the OECD practical case studies (OECD, 2011) also highlight the changing work of teachers, with a significant role in facilitation and ensuring high quality learning being emphasised.

The focus on teacher professionalism and new ways of working with students, colleagues and the community requires extensive professional learning to build new skills. Traditional approaches to teacher professional learning have involved attendees in participation in one-off conferences frequently conducted in contexts which are external to the particular teaching situation. These one-off conference attendances are relatively ineffective in terms of challenging beliefs about teaching and supporting new practices (Doecke, Parr & North, 2008; Owen, 2005). Increasingly one-off conference attendance is viewed as part of a wider range of models, with the most effective professional learning focused on more ongoing and context-specific approaches involving other team members and including joint planning, collegial discussion and assessment of student work (Sparks, 2001; Guskey, 2003; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Schmoker, 2004).

Teacher professional learning communities are especially highlighted as effective in changing
teaching practices. Research indicates that key elements of successful teacher professional learning communities are participants working regularly over an extended timeline, shared values and vision, practical activities focused on student learning, taking an inquiry stance, being reflective and collaboration and sharing experiences. Leadership support and distributed leadership are other key aspects (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, Wallace & Greenwood; 2005; Johnson, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Coburg & Russell, 2008; Dumont, Istance & Benavides, 2010; Scott, Clarkson & McDonough, 2011).

Consistent with effective student-focused innovative learning environments, OECD analysis from case studies regarding professional learning highlights similar principles for teachers. Aspects emphasised include prioritising teacher learning; working collaboratively; the importance of motivation and emotion in the learning process; focusing on individual teacher professional learning needs; having challenge without overload; and using teaching and learning data; and connectedness across activities, partners and networks (OECD). While useful, this analysis is insufficiently detailed and more in-depth investigation and analysis is required. Furthermore, there is limited research regarding professional learning communities within the Australian innovative schools context.

This paper provides preliminary findings arising from a wider research study focused on international and South Australian documents and innovative education case studies. The current paper is focused on one area of the overall study, with the research question being: What innovations, changing teacher roles and professional learning characteristics are evident within innovative learning environments in international and South Australian contexts?

Research Method

The current research uses a mixed methods approach which employs strategies of inquiry that involve ‘gathering both numeric information…as well as text’ (Cresswell, 2003:18). Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 5) indicate that the purpose of using several different research tools and techniques is to enable the researcher to be confident about the results and ensuring rigour, breadth, complexity and richness of the data. Typical of qualitative research approaches, interviews are included as part of the research process ‘to go deeper into the motivations for respondents and their reasons for responding as they do’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 27).

The current study, as relevant to this paper, involved document search, surveys and leader interviews. The desk top research focused on international research and case studies for the OECD project involving 26 countries. While there were over 150 innovative cases in the OECD project, 35 had been specially selected for detailed academic research involving interviews, classroom observations and surveys. Data about the innovations and impacts was collected, as well as examining professional learning approaches. For the purposes of this current research, a desktop audit was undertaken involving a convenience sample of those OECD innovative cases which were publicly available during the desktop research timeframe. Twenty-two cases were available, with collation and analysis occurring in regard to the specific characteristics of innovations and innovation categories (Teachers, Learners, Content, Resources, Organisation of Learning), as well as professional learning approaches.

Additionally, case study research of some South Australian schools also occurred, with a purposive sample approach being used. Three innovative South Australian contexts, as recognised within the OECD project, were selected for further investigation in the current research. Data sources included examining selected documentation submitted to the OECD project regarding the nature of innovations and professional learning, as well as relevant documentation materials at each site, including results of a professional learning survey undertaken by the schools. The professional learning communities survey involved teachers in responding to a questionnaire seeking five point Likert scale responses.
Fertile Questions, Multi-age Groupings

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(‘Not at all’, ‘Somewhat’, ‘50%’, ‘To a large degree’, ‘To a great extent’). Fifteen survey items were provided for response regarding the professional learning culture in their schools. Questions were concerned with reflective dialogue, deprivatisation of practice, collaboration, shared norms and values, supportive leadership and school structural supports such as communication and availability of time for collaborative meetings. Forty-five minute semi-structured interviews also occurred with the leaders of each of the case study schools, with questions focused on the changing role of the teacher, models of school-based professional learning and the importance of professional learning and professional learning communities in supporting innovation. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, with manual notes also taken. Collation of key themes was undertaken, with manual analysis.

Findings

International case studies

Twenty-two international case studies were examined in relation to the innovative educational practices occurring, the classifications provided by the OECD (Teachers, Learners, Resources, Organisation of Learning, Content) and the professional learning approaches (OECD, 2012a; 2012b). Cases from Australia (6), Canada (2), Finland (3), Hong Kong (1), Israel (2), Korea (1), Mexico (1), Norway (2), Slovenia (2), Spain (1) and Switzerland (1) were examined. The OECD had identified five international cases as being highly innovative in all aspects (Teachers, Learners, Resources, Organisation of Learning, Content), six international cases as being innovative in four aspects, four international cases as being innovative in three aspects, and four cases being innovative in two aspects. Information was not clearly evident in regard to three of the cases (from Australia, Spain and Switzerland).

For those cases for which categories were identified, the type of OECD classifications and percentage of cases from that country within that classification, are tabulated as follows:

Table A: OECD Classification for Innovations from Various Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country &amp; No. of cases with that classification</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Organisation of Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia n=5</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada n=2</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland n=3</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong n=1</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel n=2</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea n=1</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico n=1</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway n=2</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia n=2</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A indicates that nearly all countries’ case studies were classified by the OECD as innovative in terms of the Organisation of Learning including aspects such as using peer assessment, E-portfolios, formative assessment, project based learning, restructured work day. Case studies from Australia,
Canada, Finland and Hong Kong featured innovations in Resources for all of their cases. For example one Canadian case study had significant Resources innovation included in relation to the physical facilities and services and community links. A high school, post-secondary and community groups shared classrooms, and also employment, medical/health, fitness and artistic and performance facilities (OECD, 2012b). Other case study sites had purpose-built open space/specialist area education facilities to support learning, were using community specialist areas for learning or students were accessing significant online content from off campus or on-campus sources (OECD, 2012b). About half of the countries had all their case study schools with innovations in the role of Learners or with a significant focus on innovations in terms of Content. These types of innovations in various contexts included significant use of inquiry processes; interdisciplinary curriculum; and students developing individualised learning plans, goal setting and writing reflective commentaries about their learning. There was also a wider group of people involved in ‘teaching’ in some contexts, with formalised programs and whole school partnerships with community artistic groups occurring or with significant after-school enrichment programs being available.

Table A also shows that the OECD classified the case studies for seven countries as having significant changes in the role of the Teacher. The Teacher role was redefined, with teachers working as coaches, mentors and facilitators with responsibility for designing the learning environment and collection and analysis of student data (OECD).

Regarding professional learning, for the fifteen cases in which sufficient information of varying detail was provided in regard to professional learning, a range of specific approaches was identified. External conference attendance was highlighted in most of the cases, as well as other internal activities such as seminars, workshops, scheduled mandatory training, interactive group sessions, project work, individual staff development plans, collaborative action research projects, and peer observation and feedback. A significant professional learning approach outlined was teachers working together in interdisciplinary school-based teams to collaboratively plan, teach and assess or involvement in school-based or network action research/inquiry teams or teams involved in peer coaching and classroom observations (OECD; OECD, 2012b).

**South Australian case studies**

**Innovative practices and professional learning approaches**

The South Australian case study schools were involved in significant educational innovation for various timeframes from eighteen months to nine years, with about 300-400 students highly involved in the innovative practices in each location. One senior secondary specialist school was purpose built to be innovative. The other two schools, one being primary, one being secondary, operated within traditional buildings which were modified. The secondary school was progressively introducing innovation across the campus, beginning with year 8 students and with several year levels involved.

Documentation and leaders interviews indicated that while there were some specific differences, there was broad consistency of innovative practices across the three case study schools. Innovations were also broadly reflective of the OECD literature, with transformations occurring in the role of Learners, Resources (community, information technology, physical space), Content and Organisation of learning being evident. Multi-age groupings including reception to year 7 ‘Magpie’ groupings and year 10-12 Tutor groups; big picture or ‘fertile questions’ providing opportunities for interdisciplinary and deep learning experiences; individual student learning plans; and physical spaces being transformed into ‘campfires’ for targeted ‘masterclasses’ for specialist skill-building or ‘cave spaces’ for quiet reflection, are some for the innovative practices evident (Leader Interview 1; Leader Interview 2; Leader Interview 3; OECD 2012a; OECD 2012b).

Consistent with innovative school internationally, findings from the case study schools also indicated
changes in the role of Teachers. Instead of being transmitters of information, teaching has become deprivatised, with teachers working in partnerships with students as ‘teacher engagers’, coaches and mentors and increasingly working in collaborative teacher teams (OECD 2012a, 2012b).

Innovative case study school leader interviews, documentation and teacher surveys also indicated the importance of professional learning to support teachers in working as learner facilitators and adopting educational practices consistent with the innovation agenda. Consistent with the international case studies outlined above, various professional learning approaches were indicated including external conference attendance, action research/inquiry projects, mentoring, coaching, school visits and collaborative school-based teams meeting on a regular basis (Leader Interview 1; Leader Interview 2; Leader Interview 3; OECD 2012a; OECD 2012b).

One school leader’s comments reflect the overwhelming commitment to school based teams and professional learning communities in which ‘there’s professional learning right through the day on a daily basis because of our team teaching scenario, where teachers can bounce ideas off each other and reflect at the end of the day and for following days. So there is that learning from and with one another on that basis’ (Leader interview 2).

All the schools were strongly committed to teacher teams and professional learning communities as the most significant model to support their innovation agenda, especially through teacher teams (generally interdisciplinary) who were responsible for a particular group of students and were often involved in planning, teaching and assessing collaboratively. However staff in some schools also belonged to other teams within their schools. These teams were focused on professional learning goals, school-wide planning or action research projects of interest, with professional learning also being an expectation within these various groups. Professional learning occurs:

…informally through workspace co-location and in the staff room; through to each staff member developing annual Individual Professional Development plans; involvement in action research work; gathering feedback on professional practice to determine professional learning directions and group assessment of student learning against other team-based activities. The staff documents their Individual Professional Development Plans, incorporating goals for improving pedagogical content knowledge and Action Research linked to the strategic directions of the school. They write regular progress reports, sharing their plans and progress reports (OECD, 2012b: 12).

Consistent with other research regarding professional learning communities (Haar, 2003; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Scott, Clarkson & McDonough, 2011), surveys, documentation and leader interviews highlighted key themes of shared values and vision, ongoing collaboration, commitment to joint practical activities and student learning outcomes, supportive and shared leadership and teacher inquiry and learning together.

**Shared values and vision within professional learning communities**

Over varying timeframes of eighteen months to nine years, the case study schools have been establishing significantly innovative educational practices. While there are some specific differences in the nature of the reforms involved, there is also considerable consistency across the case study schools in terms of their vision, shared values and approaches in regard to innovative practices and meeting the needs of every student, with specific approaches including:

...choice; experiential opportunities; discovery and inquiry; connections to their individual background and needs; rigorous and challenging learning activities …Specific and intensive intervention strategies are necessary to enable some students to achieve their potential and overcome blocks to their learning (OECD, 2012a, School B, Supplementary Information, Annex 1).

While these descriptors of educational practices may reflect the aspirational goals of many schools, the
case study schools indicated their involvement in significant educational innovation focused on a revisioning and revaluing of educational approaches involving:

....a deliberate departure from the one size fits all model, so no longer do we have one teacher standing in front of 25 kids doing the same thing at the same time...Most of the work is in learning conversations.. a huge shift from the teacher being the deliverer of content out the front to more of a facilitator of learning (Leader interview 3).

Reflecting the situation more widely about the significance of the educational innovation, there is further information about the school which:

…has intentionally embraced innovation for the purpose of school transformation, rather than engaging in school improvement through incremental steps. As a result, the educational offering has become genuinely learner-centred, with the development of a personalised model, in which each student will experience different learning opportunities through interactions with a variety of people, in different ways, and at their own pace. A ‘community of thinking’ has evolved where creativity and innovation, on the part of both students and teachers, are encouraged and supported. Students can immerse themselves in pursuits for which they have natural talent and genuine passion (OECD, 2012a, School C: 2).

Personalised learning involving every student having an individual learning plan and the significance of the innovation involved in terms of the teacher-student relationship is further highlighted through the school leader interview comment: ‘We’ve completely transformed the structure and methodology etc to allow the personalised learning to occur...Personalised learning transfers that power to the student and they are doing that deciding around what they learn, how they learn it, what level they’re up to’ (Leader interview 3).

Teachers and leaders being involved in establishing and maintaining a commitment to a shared vision of personalised learning, success for all students and being focused on using innovative approaches and working collaboratively to ensure this happens, was a key emergent theme. Collegial and ongoing professional learning to build respect and trust and to share the vision and language was viewed as a critical aspect of this process:

We’re talking about whole school innovation, change, focused on improvement. You can’t do that unless you’ve got people who are speaking the same language, sharing the same vision...they’re trusting and respecting of each other, constantly looking at ways of changing....You can’t do that by yourself. it’s incredibly isolating, threatening...(It involves) structuring the whole approach to the professional learning, to the professional learning community as a baseline (Leader interview 1).

The commitment to a shared vision and values was also evident in the surveys, particularly in the schools where professional learning communities were more established. Teacher survey respondents provided over 90% positive responses [and 80%, 72% and 58% respectively (to a larger degree or to a great extent)] regarding the vision that all students can learn at reasonably high levels, given the support of teachers. Similarly, teachers indicated 90%-100% positive responses (and 90%, 71% and 58% to a larger degree or to a great extent) regarding shared norms and values concerning critical education issues and a collective focus on students learning. Two of the school staff teams indicated 100% positive responses [and 87%, 94%, 58% respectively (to a larger degree or to a great extent)] in regard to their leaders being supportive and focused on shared purpose, continuous improvement and collaboration.

**Ongoing collaboration within professional learning communities**

The literature (Mockler & Sachs, 2002; Head, 2003; Owen, 2005) about successful professional
learning within innovative contexts highlights the importance of moving beyond traditional single teacher classrooms and teachers working collaboratively, with collegiality being a significant characteristic of the case study schools. Case study school teachers work in various professional learning teams dependent on the school, although of critical importance for student learning are the professional learning teams focused on a group of students and involving collaborative planning, teaching and assessment. As outlined by one leader:

It’s a team of about seven or eight people and within that they have an advisory group, so it’s like a mentoring role and an advisory group. So you’ll have the one person with 17 children and then that team of seven or eight with the whole cohort of 120. So the sort of thing that they’re doing, they write all the integrated units as a team, so there’s input from all of them. They’re moderating work now as a team, so that’s really helped because we’ve got the teams made up of people with different backgrounds, like some maths teachers, some science teachers, some SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment) teachers. That’s completely transformed to groups that are genuinely working together, talking about students, you know. So we’re seeing genuine modification to work now for students with special needs… for our more gifted students (Leader interview 3).

Beyond collaborating and planning student work within a particular teaching team, another school leader described the processes involving the whole staff professional learning community, with comments provided about ‘how we’re going to have a sustainable environment in the school...about the slow learning process to really build up some deeper understandings about things’ (Leader interview 2).

Various processes were described in regard to the teams working together, some of which occurred within scheduled and regular meeting times while other collaborative work happened informally. For example, most of the case study schools have co-located teacher interdisciplinary teams into the same physical office area to support ongoing teacher learning and collaboration, with staff room informal learning also happening. This is evident in comments such as: ‘In the staff room, we actually do talk about learning and areas of expertise and I’ve learned more about science in the last few years than I did in all my previous schools...and it’s really stimulating’ and ‘We actually had people from across disciplines in those work spaces. Sharing happens in the staff room, teaching teams, central studies and work spaces’ (OECD, 2012b, School A: 13).

Deprivatisation, responsibility to the team, reinvigorating the passion for teaching and developing deep understandings through shared work were some of the advantages of collaboration which were outlined in the various school leader interviews. The advantages are indicated by several leaders from different context as follows:

…the stuff around passion, to me that’s what professional learning communities reinvigorate. Putting people back in contact with why they want to be teachers. Because you’re talking about learning, talking about teaching. You’re not talking about behavior management (Leader interview 1).

If you’ve got someone in the PLC (professional learning community) who’s a really deep thinker and is going for some really rich stuff and [for] somebody [else it] might be…more of a surface-based thing, they’re going to be exposed to this deeper thinker and have that kind of level of thinking modeled to them (Leader interview 2).

However, as highlighted in the literature (Hargreaves, 1992; Head, 2003; Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth, 2000, 2001; Jarzabkowski, 2001), collaboration based on conviviality, contrived collegiality and congeniality may be an impediment to learning and collaboration should not be romanticized. The challenge of working in a professional learning community which deprivatises teaching, especially for newcomers, was also raised by another school leader, with the following comment:

You have to have a deep sense of your own teaching area...When you start working with other teachers
you have to be able to really argue the toss about why you do the things you do and how you do them. And that means you’ve got to have a pretty deep understanding of that…And it’s not always easy to work in a group. You don’t always get your own way. You have to compromise (Leader interview 1).

Another school leader similarly raised the issue of deprivatisation and the challenge of teaching together, even in situations in which teachers have volunteered for team teaching, emphasizing that in the past most teachers wanted to be isolated ‘… whereas this is a very public event with all teachers being able to observe each other at any time’ (Leader interview 3).

The teacher survey generally indicated a high level of collaboration. Given the differing timeframes of establishing innovative practices and professional learning community approaches, the three case study school teacher survey responses were mostly positive in regard to socialisation [with 85%, 96%, 50% respectively indicating socialisation and building identity of newcomers occurring at the higher level in relation to responses of to a larger degree or to a great extent]. Responses regarding deprivatisation of practice were also positive [including 79%, 60%, 42% respectively indicating sharing, observing and discussion of teaching methods and philosophies to a larger degree of to a great extent].

**Practical activities focused on improved student learning within professional learning communities**

Teacher surveys, leader interviews and documentation indicated that collaborative planning of student work, team teaching, and jointly moderating and assessing are some of the practical activities which professional learning communities are engaged in, with data being used to understand and improve student learning outcomes.

In relation to planning units for students and assessing student work together, one of the school leaders described practical activities collaborative processes as follows:

People will come up with an idea for a theme and that can come from anywhere. Anyone in the group can suggest an idea for a theme…. you know, raw idea, right through to something that they’ve actually thought quite a bit about. And people are accepting of that. And then we can go through basically a brainstorming session…. And you end up then with about 2000 ideas, not all of which you can do. And so then a smaller team volunteers to go and massage that stuff…….They meet back as a whole team. They then make sure that there are rubrics or other success criteria that are explicit to each assessment tasks that’s developed….Yeah, it’s certainly causing debate, which is great….Again, if you’ve got the trust there and people are happy to say Look, I reckon you’ve given that too high a mark or You’ve been a bit rough on the kid there, they’re able to have those conversations, and so that’s, I guess, that’s one of the starting points for us, doing the challenging versus just the supporting role (Leader interview 3).

The teacher survey also indicated positive responses about the team’s involvement in practical tasks, using student data and trying out new ideas. This is evident in the over 83% survey responses from staff from all case study schools (indicating satisfactory or higher) regarding two questions for interdependent teaching roles and planning, teaching and working together or working collaboratively in producing curriculum and assessment materials to improve learning.

One school was particularly focused on student learning data. The importance of teachers examining data about student learning within team collaborative processes is highlighted by this comment:

What I’m really interested in seeing is…if people will really dig deeper into what they see as being evidence of making a change. It’s often kids had a good time and they enjoyed it. I got feedback from students that said this was fun. But there are staff who are now looking at indicators that include student understanding of concepts, students connecting to others in the class, working more as self-directed learners in a collaborative way and getting them to reflect on that (Leader interview 1).
Supportive and shared leadership within professional learning communities

The literature about successful professional learning highlights the importance of leadership support and building a culture of shared leadership (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Caldwell, 2012), and this was very evident within the case study schools. External conference attendance time and funding, co-located physical office space, release time and funding for teams to visit other schools, opportunities for leadership and wider experience including within formal decision making committees and establishment and active support for various types of professional learning teams, are features of each of the case study schools. The teacher surveys also indicated over 80% positive responses (indicating satisfactory or higher) regarding the physical spaces supporting discussion of educational practices and communication structures assisting with the exchange of ideas. There were varying responses regarding provision of time to meet and talk, with satisfactory or higher responses being indicated for 97%, 82% and 50% respectively for each of the schools involved.

The specific strategies outlined by various case study schools which indicated supportive leadership structures for professional learning were a shared staff journal for recording key events and experiences, provision of templates focused on external professional development and establishment of a reflective afternoon session to share conference learning with interested others.

An example of supportive leadership in another of the case study schools is focused on supporting professional learning conversations to build staff skills in giving explicit student feedback through peer observation and video examples, ‘setting up some deliberate structures where people can challenge each other about the level at which they do that work’ (Leader interview 3).

All the case study schools are focused on staff being actively involved in making decisions about the school. Their teams and principals are highly conscious about the importance of distributive leadership in maintaining change agendas, as reflected in the following:

There is a strong ownership as a staff for the curriculum and pedagogical practices….This ownership is due to the staff creating them as a team and continuing to develop them ….We have collectively developed a culture of change, high expectations and commitment to the school’s philosophy…Shared leadership reinforces the ownership that staff have for the success of the school in achieving improved outcomes for students…Having all staff leading gives an appreciation for the role, which has increased the sense of trust in one another, so initiatives can progress more efficiently and with great support (OECD, 2012a, School B, supplementary information :8).

Teacher inquiry collaborative learning within professional learning communities

Consistent with the professional learning community research about collegial teams learning from each other but guarding against insularity (Smith, 2003), the case study schools provide teachers with funding and time to visit other innovative schools or attend conferences. One leader’s interview comment captures the situation for all of the case study schools that:

We spend quite a lot of money on that more formal external professional learning as well, ensuring that we’re constantly challenged with whatever is new and out there…They don’t go just for a day out of school…they go to learn and they bring that learning back (Leader interview 2).

The case study schools seemed highly aware of the importance of teacher inquiry, reflection and collaboration resulting in ongoing learning. Highly positive responses (to a large or great extent) were indicated for reflective dialogue (83%, 88%, 75% respectively) including talking about situations and specific challenges faced. Similarly, highly positive responses (to a large or great extent) of 97%, 94%, 75% respectively, were indicated about openness to improvement and teacher taking risks to try new techniques and ideas and making efforts to learn more about their profession.
The case study schools are also at varying stages in introducing inquiry/action research professional learning teams based on research interests. These teams are usually involved in defining a research question, collecting relevant data, reporting findings and seeking follow up action on issues of relevance to the school. One school which is more experienced in this area indicates:

The action research groups, depending on the group, are working really well. The whole concept of inquiry is a new experience for teachers and it is expected that they engage in reflection on their practice. But for some it’s a new experience and they do that in a structured manner that involves gathering some data and doing something with this, observe that and then report back …Once they get their head around what action research actually involves, they’re more likely to be meaningful in terms of true reflective, true inquiry (Leader interview 1).

Discussion

Various international and South Australian innovative learning environments were investigated. Consistent with OECD literature, specific innovative practices in relation to the role of Learners, Teachers, Content, Organisation of Learning and Resources were identified, as well as examples of the changing teacher role and professional learning characteristics.

In the international context and within the South Australian case study schools investigated, there is a significant shift in the work of the teacher from a whole class instructional role to one of being a co-learner, a facilitator/coach/mentor and a designer/planner of the learning environment. In many of the international and South Australian case study schools, teachers are working collaboratively within interdisciplinary groups and involved in planning, co-teaching and to some degree, moderating student work and examining data about learning.

Beyond external conference attendance and sharing this information with others, a key professional learning approach in the case study schools involves the establishment of various teams including for collegial action research in interest areas, teacher professional learning plans and peer observations. Case study school leaders are particularly committed to the establishment of teacher professional teams focused on a particular group of students and operating as professional learning communities. In the South Australian case study schools, teachers had volunteered to work in the innovative context within interdisciplinary teams and there was some degree of choice about the membership. Planning and co-teaching and to some degree, collegial approaches to assessment, are involved.

Professional learning communities characteristics have been previously identified by various researchers (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, Wallace & Greenwood; 2005; Johnson, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Coburg & Russell, 2008; Dumont, Istance & Benavides, 2010; Scott, Clarkson & McDonough, 2011). Shared vision, collegiality, focusing on practical tasks and data about student learning are some of the key aspects. In the South Australian case study school research, teacher professional learning communities seem to be evident, especially in the schools in which staff have been using innovative educational practices and building a professional learning culture over a longer timeframe.

The evolutionary nature of professional learning communities in the case study schools is consistent with Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth’s (2000; 2001) research. This research indicates varying developmental stages from ‘beginning’ to ‘evolving’ to ‘mature’ across aspects such as norms of group interaction, supporting individual teacher diversity, negotiating conflicting perspectives and communal responsibility for the learning of others in the professional community. This notion of varying developmental stages for the teacher professional learning communities within the case study schools is particularly highlighted in the teacher surveys. While some aspects are highly developed across all schools, deprivatisation of practice and shared vision were less evident in some contexts.
than others, particularly in the situations where using more innovative practices and the establishment of teacher professional learning communities is still in its formative years.

A detailed exploration of the developmental aspects of teacher professional learning communities is beyond the scope of this preliminary paper and needs further examination within the wider context of the overall research program. Indeed, a limitation of this preliminary paper is that it only reports on some of the data findings. Future papers will provide data obtained from a wider range of research processes, thereby enabling a more-in-depth analysis and discussion about teacher professional learning communities and their impacts within innovative learning environments.

Despite limitations, this research is important in contributing to the international literature about professional learning within innovative learning environments. The research highlights the importance of building a strong sense of ownership and collegial professional learning which permeates the school community, nurtured through ongoing contacts among teachers in their day-to-day work with each other and as ‘teacher engagers’ and co-learners with their students.
References


