

“Taking Off and Flying with Action Learning and Action Research”

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I. INTRODUCTION

Education systems and governments, through a steady barrage of policies and reports (Ewing, Smith, Anderson, Gibson, & Manuel, 2004; McRae, Ainsworth, Groves, Rowland, & Zbar, 2001), have placed high priority on teachers continually learning and updating their skills and knowledge (Darling- Hammond, Chung- Wei, Andre, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Doecke, et al., 2008). By engaging in ongoing professional learning it is argued (Hargreaves, Fullan and Senge, 2007) that teachers are better prepared to meet the challenges of teaching in the twenty- first century. However, as a profession we still do not have definitive information about what effective professional learning is. There is considerable openness about what constitutes effective professional learning.

Professional learning practices that provide opportunities for teachers to learn together in collaborative groups and address local needs have been shown to be extremely effective (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998; Groundwater- Smith & Mockler, 2009). Positive professional relationships, which encourage collaborative practices and are based on trust enable a comfortable sharing of practice and collegial feedback (Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2007). Hargreaves (2007), Connor and Clawson (2004), and Loader (1997) have found collaborative, participatory professional learning is more likely to generate successful and sustainable change in schools. Stenhouse (as cited in Ruddock & Hopkins, 1985) advocates the cultivation of a professional learning culture in which teachers collaboratively research their practice with a view to improvement.

Action learning and action research are used widely for professional learning in schools to address identified school targets and issues. Sometimes action learning and action research projects are funded through government grants. I seek to identify the impact and sustainability of special program funding to determine whether this type of funding is a sound investment in the medium term and whether governments should continue to find ways to fund special programs which enable groups of teachers to carry out local projects that address locally identified needs.

II. MY LIVING THEORY

There exist a number of factors that recur in relation to what strengthens or inhibits the success of action learning and action research projects (Aubusson, Ewing, & Hoban, 2009; Ewing, Smith, Anderson, Gibson, & Manuel, 2004; Fullan, 2010, 2009; Groundwater- Smith & Mockler, 2009). These factors play a role in determining whether action learning and action research are sustained as professional learning models in schools. The common approach to professional learning in schools is teachers being trained by others to introduce a new direction, although a change is increasingly evident in the literature (Doecke, et al., 2008; Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005; McRae, Ainsworth, Groves, Rowland, & Zbar, 2001). The change is a result of research indicating the most successful professional learning occurs when there is

“direction from the centre, but flexibility at the local level” (Hargreaves, Fullan, Senge, & Robinson, 2007) to ensure an innovation meets the particular needs of a school and its community.

Since 2006, I have led teams of teachers in improving their professional practice through action learning and action research. These approaches are sometimes funded by systems and governments as tools to implement new initiatives in schools, and often focus on the quality of teaching in classrooms. The teams and projects that I have led have been funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace relations as an initiative of the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program (AGQTP) through Quality Teaching Action Learning (QTAL). AGQTP “provides funds to strengthen the skills and understandings of the teaching profession” (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2003) and aims to improve teacher quality and ultimately student learning outcomes.

I am interested in the sustained impact of action learning on teacher professional learning in schools. School based approaches that encourage teachers to learn together in collaborative groups to address local needs, are usually effective professional learning practices. An important part of this ongoing process of improvement is building positive professional relationships based on trust in which teachers are comfortable sharing their practice and receiving feedback from their colleagues. Yet despite both my experience as a facilitator of action learning and a significant literature that advocates it, schools generally do not take up an action research mode of inquiry, even though they have school based professional learning funds that would enable them to do so.

QTAL project funding began in 2003, and ceased in June 2010. Through QTAL, schools applied for funding to carry out local projects that incorporated the New South Wales Quality Teaching Framework and other national education priorities. Three factors distinguished QTAL from other professional learning programs:

- Teams of teachers (usually 6- 8 teachers) worked in an action-learning model to address a local workplace issue and national education agenda.
- Learning was project based, and the team set the direction and pace of the learning.
- School based QTAL teams were supported in their learning by state coordinators and academic partners from Universities.

(New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2009a)

Because the Government continues to invest large sums of money on school improvement and reforms, understanding the impact of and sustainability of special programs is important in order to inform policy and decision making in relation to government investment in professional learning.

The AGQTP, (which was formerly titled the Quality Teacher Programme over 2000-2003), received total funding of \$A76.8 million over 2000-2003, with a further \$A82.4 million provided for 2003-2005. Of these amounts, \$97.2 million has so far been allocated to professional learning projects.

(Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005, p. 3).

The funding levels quoted by Ingvarson are significant, and QTAL evaluative studies (Ateliera Learning Solutions Pty Ltd, 2005; Ewing, et al., 2004; Hoban, Ewing, Kervin, Anderson, & Smith, 2005; Ingvarson, et al., 2005) are in agreement that action learning in schools positively impacts on teacher professional learning in the short term. Ewing (2004) found action learning is used most effectively in a school culture that supports learning through trust, support and collaboration- where leadership supports learning as the core business of the school, and resources are committed to ensure everyone learns “within a shared, collective mission” (Ewing, et al., 2004, p. 15). Hoban (2005) identified a number of ‘enabling factors’ as important in sustaining professional learning through action learning. In the Hoban study, it was found some schools focused on action learning in their QTAL projects, some schools focused on the

implementation of the QT Framework and some schools incorporated both action learning and Quality Teaching into their projects as was the intention of the funding body. By investigating schools that have participated in QTAL projects through AGQTP QTAL funding since its inception in 2003, I aim to determine the extent to which action learning has been sustained in the medium term. Existing evaluative studies of AGQTP QTAL projects have been of short-term impact (six months or less) rather than medium term impact (since the introduction of the QT Framework in 2003).

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies to determine sustainability have been undertaken in the short term (up to 6 months after funding ceases) but no data is available to determine the impact of this funding in the medium term. A gap in the literature currently exists as to whether this mode of inquiry is sustained in schools in the medium term-between 1 year and 6 years after funding ceases. It is difficult to determine the impact over a longer period of time (more than six years) because research suggests change requires consistent leadership and “most school leaders do not stay in the job long enough to achieve this” (Goodlab, as cited in Goldberg, 2000, p. 85). Sheppard, Brown and Dibben (2009) also found that change requires continuity in leadership and consistent leadership is a major determinant as to whether change is sustained in schools.

QTAL projects were a small part of the huge umbrella that constituted AGQTP activities across Australian education systems from 2003. The first major evaluative study of AGQTP QTAL projects was funded by the NSW DET in 2004 (Ewing et. al. 2004). It evaluated QTAL projects that occurred in schools from term 4 -2003 to term 2- 2004. This study investigated the conditions under which action learning is an appropriate and effective form of professional development for teachers in NSW public schools. A range of data was used in this evaluation:

- 50 project submissions
- 39 interim project reports
- 48 final project reports
- 8 case study schools
- Feedback from 20 academic partners

A number of findings in this study have relevance to the proposed study because it identifies the factors that are likely to make action learning succeed as a form of professional learning. It was found by Ewing et al. (2004) that action learning succeeds best in a school culture that supports learning, visible by:

- A trusting, collaborative working culture
- A school culture that supports risk taking and learning from mistakes
- The school leadership being actively committed to the learning of all the school community
- Resources are committed to support learning “within a shared collective mission that sees student and teacher learning as the core business of the school (Ewing, et al., 2004, p. 15)”.

The Ewing study did not address the question of whether the action learning was sustained after the cessation of the government funding. The following year, a second related report (Hoban et al., 2005) was released that specifically investigated whether the learning in QTAL was sustained six months after government funding ceased. It was a mixed methods study that consisted of a survey in conjunction with follow- up qualitative data gathering in 13 case study schools. Hoban et al. identified a number of “enabling factors (p. 7)” that are important in sustaining action learning, grouped under three headings:

1. *Workplace conditions*- leadership, antecedents, school culture, funding, time

2. *Content*- in QTAL this was the QT framework in relation to each teacher's practice
3. *Process*- the process of action learning which includes reflecting, sharing, action, planning, questioning, observing and facilitating.

The Hoban study was important because it addressed the issues of impact and sustainability of action learning in the short term- six months after funding ceased. The report specified future research should focus on schools that demonstrated all three enabling conditions to determine whether action learning initiated by QTAL is sustained in schools in the longer term.

In 2005 the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) published a comparative report based on 4 studies that investigated factors affecting the impact of professional development on teacher practice and student outcomes (Ingvarson et al. 2005) through the AGQTP. This report looked at projects from 2001- 2003 that were funded under the Quality Teacher Program (QTP). The QTP was the forerunner of QTAL, prior to the introduction of the QT framework into NSW government schools. The study surveyed 3 250 teachers who had participated in 80 professional development activities. The Ingvarson et al. (2005) study sought to identify characteristics of successful professional development programs and did not specifically target action learning, as did the Ewing and Hoban reports. The process of action learning was described by Ingvarson as "active learning (p.8)" although it described a similar process in that it was referring to "teachers being actively engaged in reflecting on their practice, identifying specific areas of their practice they wish to improve, and reflecting on their, and their students learning outcomes (Ingvarson et al., p.8)". Major findings in this study were:

- Opportunities for active learning, and reflection on practice was significant across all 4 studies.
- The level of professional community in a school is significant because it impacts on teacher knowledge and practice.
- Programs that built on opportunities for follow- up support were useful for teachers in trying out new skills. This variable includes time for teachers to jointly plan and reflect on their learning, and their students' learning.
- Opportunities to learn or process variables had the largest effect on individual program outcomes.

As in the Ewing (2004) and Hoban (2005) studies, Ingvarson identified the importance of teachers collaboratively reflecting on their practice, and being supported in their learning by the wider school professional learning community.

Another study funded by the New South Wales Department of School Education in 2005 (Aubusson et al.) provides valuable background information on the conditions that support action learning in schools. This study investigated QTAL projects implemented in 2004- 2005 and focused on the conditions that influence teachers' implementation of an inquiry-based approach to changing teacher practice. This evaluative report surveyed 82 government schools that participated in 50 QTAL projects. From these schools the research team selected 9 case studies. They also analysed a range of project related documents including school policies, minutes of team meetings, and records of procedures. It was found action learning promoted a school culture of collaboration, produced action and facilitated ongoing change. Aubusson et al. (2005) reported action learning cultivated Quality Teaching and stimulated change to teacher practice. The findings from this study supported previous findings that action learning enhances teacher-learning outcomes (Ewing et al. 2004, Hoban et al. 2005, Ingvarson et al. 2005). The Aubusson et al. study (2005) did not address the issue of whether the learning from QTAL is sustained.

In 2005, the Australian Government commissioned a meta evaluation of AGQTP from its inception in 1999 to 2004 to determine the future direction of AGQTP in Australian schools (Ateliera Learning Solutions Pty Ltd (2005). The study made a number of recommendations, many of which have been

followed and have set the direction for professional learning in schools both now and in the future. These recommendations were:

AGQTP be continued for another 4 years.

- AGQTP focus on one objective- to increase teacher and school leader skills with clear links to the challenges identified in the Australian government reports “Teachers for the 21st Century (2003)” and “Australia’s Teachers Australia’s Future (2003)”.
- Outcome oriented performance indicators are needed to measure program achievements. This recommendation has been identified as important in all the QTAL evaluation studies (Ewing et al. 2004, Hoban et al.2005, Aubusson et al. 2005, Ingvarson et al. 2005).
- Funding for state and territory projects be multiyear, and aligned to the school year, rather than begin and end mid- year which had been the case up to this point.
- AGQTP to address national emerging issues that require a national perspective to inform future effort. This recommendation had implications for teacher accreditation as education systems worldwide come to terms with “issues of teacher quality, accountability and professional standards (Groundwater- Smith & Mockler, 2009 pp. 60).
- Regular strategic forums of stakeholder groups be held to ensure AGQTP remains focused on its strategic directions against outcomes measures.
- Department of Science and Training (DEST) to liaise with the National Institute of Quality Teaching and School Leadership Directorate to facilitate the exchange of information gained through the program’s reporting process for the development of nationally agreed higher order standards of teacher and school leader professional practice.
- Where appropriate, commission national strategic initiatives through the Institute of Teachers.

(Ateliera Learning solutions Pty Ltd, 2005, pp. 123- 130)

A second meta evaluation, undertaken by Ewing and a team of educational researchers from the University of Sydney on AGQTP from 2004- 2009 was carried out in November 2009, the findings of which have not yet been published.

IV. ACTION LEARNING IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

Many schools in Australia have informally engaged in teacher professional learning projects using action learning as a model in response to emerging issues in their schools (Atweh, et al., 1998; Ewing, et al., 2004; McRae, et al., 2001; New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2008). In NSW state schools, the ‘Priority Schools Program’ formerly called the ‘Disadvantaged Schools Program’ has a history of using action learning and action research to engage teachers in researching and improving their practice in low socioeconomic status schools. The program aims to provide additional funding to reduce the achievement gap for students in schools with high concentrations of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2008). The Federal Government has funded formal programs for professional development that use a collaborative participatory approach for some time (Grundy, 1998; Sachs, 1997). From 1993 to 1996 the Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET) funded the National Professional Development Program, which focused on improving teacher knowledge and competencies. From 1994- 1996 the Innovative Links Program partnered professional development with educational reform and school restructuring. It focused on developing schools as learning communities and linked schools and universities in professional

partnerships. Action research was used to collaboratively address issues identified by the school. In the Innovative Links project, government funding bought teachers time to reflect, plan and evaluate their practice. In 2000, the Quality Teacher Program (QTP) began which continued to build upon collegial and collaborative professional learning practices that had been established in previous government funded programs (Doecke, et al., 2008; Esson, et al., 2002; McRae, et al., 2001).

The QTP funding was available from 2000- 2003 through the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace relations (DEEWR) as an initiative of the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program (AGQTP). AGQTP “provides funds to strengthen the skills and understandings of the teaching profession” (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2009a), which aimed at improving teacher quality and ultimately student learning outcomes.

In 2003 the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET) introduced the Quality Teaching Framework into NSW schools (NSW Department of School Education, 2003), which is a tool for pedagogical reform that focuses on improving the quality of teaching in classrooms. Following the introduction of the Quality Teaching (QT) Framework, AGQTP made competitive funds available to schools through the Quality Teaching Action Learning (QTAL) initiative. Under QTAL, schools applied for funding which enabled them to carry out locally identified projects to embed/ explore QT in their own sites in relation to specific aspects of their work. Funding specifically targeted teacher professional learning in an action-learning model, through which teachers “learn with and from each other” (Revens, 1982, p. 65).

V. FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO SUSTAINED TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CULTURES

QTAL projects have been found to contribute to the creation of professional learning cultures in schools in which they were implemented in the short term (Ewing et al., 2004, Hoban, 2002, Ingvarson et al., 2005). Hoban (2005) investigated the sustainability of change and teacher learning that resulted from QTAL in the short term (up to six months after government funding ceased). He identified six factors that affect whether action learning is sustained based on thirteen case study schools:

- Teachers need to be up skilled in using the process of action learning.
- Time for action learning needs to be incorporated into professional learning components of school management plans.
- There needs to be continuity in the content focus for school based change projects.
- The sustainability of projects needs to be monitored over time in order to evaluate their effectiveness.
- A collaborative work culture exists that promotes school based teacher research.
- Enabling conditions for action learning need to be in place in schools.

(Hoban, et al., 2005, p. 8)

Based on the above factors, the authors (Hoban, et al., 2005) devised an emerging model of sustainable school based professional learning that elaborated on the enabling conditions that are important for sustaining professional learning through action learning. They organised these enabling conditions into three groups:

- *Content*- which included teachers’ practice in relation to the QT Framework, including need, ownership, control and affirmation.
- *Process*- how schools take up the AL process including reflecting, sharing, action, planning, questioning, observing and facilitating.

- *Workplace conditions*- those conditions specific to individual schools including leadership, antecedents (whether the school has been involved in other successful change projects), school culture, funding and time.

A diagram of the Hoban model can be seen below:

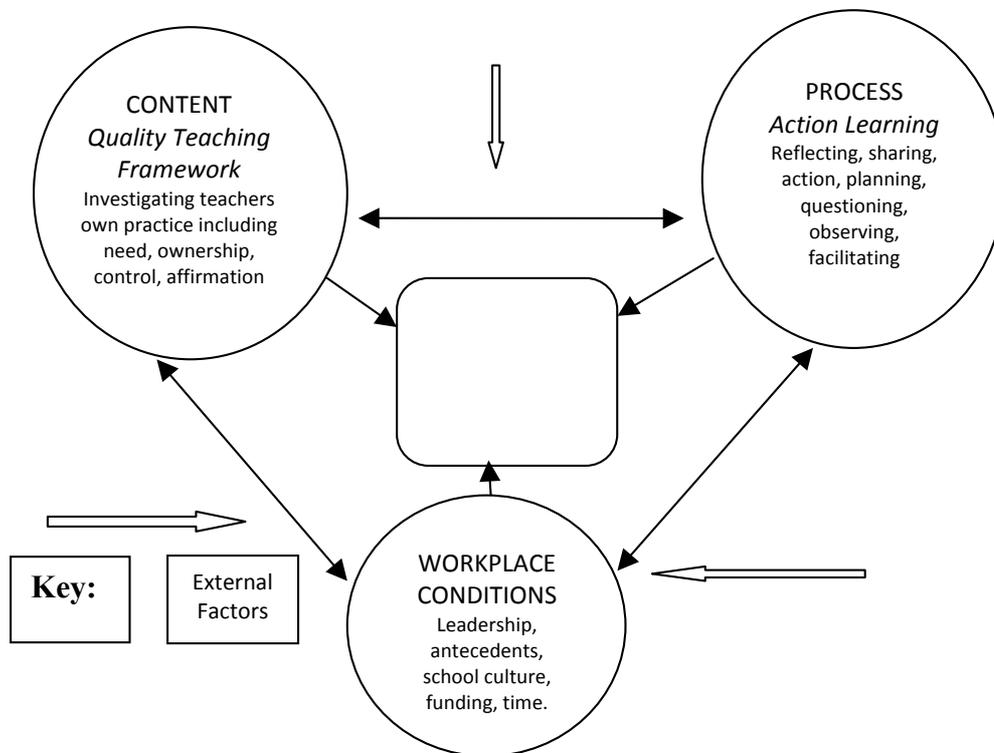


Figure 1. Emerging model of sustainable school- based professional learning.

(Hoban, et al., 2005, p. 7)

The Australian Council of Educational Research (Ingvarson et al., 2005) reported on four evaluative studies carried out in 2002- 2003 through the AGQTP. They used data from 3 250 teachers who had participated in eighty professional development activities. Teachers were surveyed three months after their participation in AGQTP. A focus of the study was to determine the impact of teacher professional learning projects funded by AGQTP on teacher practice. It was found significant positive effects of AGQTP projects in schools were identified in relation to:

- the inclusion of project content into classroom teaching.
- active learning. (It is unclear whether the researchers meant 'action learning' from this term).
- building professional community in schools.

Ingvarson argued that teachers rarely provided collegial feedback on observable classroom practice (2005). Data for this study was collected in 2002- 2003, prior to the implementation of the QT Framework into NSW schools in 2003, and three months after QTAL funding ceased in case study schools. A focus of the QT framework is providing collegial feedback to teachers in order to improve the quality of teaching in classrooms. In the Hoban (2005) study, providing collegial feedback by teachers to teachers was identified as a strength of the QTAL model. A study by Aubusson, Brady and Dineham (2005) were in agreement that peer observation and feedback on classroom practice could be a strength, but also a potential constraint to implementing action learning. Some case study schools in the Aubusson study (2005) chose not to participate in peer observation, although it was a focus of QTAL, because teachers were uncomfortable

providing feedback on peers' classroom practice. They perceived the process as "judgemental" (p. 6). One of the recommendations of this study was that peer observation not be imposed but regarded as a valuable source of teacher feedback on classroom practice.

18.1 That peer observation and/ or direct sharing of classroom experience be encouraged gently, among well informed participants, conducted with sensitivity, and initiated by and among trusting colleagues- but not imposed

(Aubusson, Brady, & Dinham, 2005, p. 8)

As the Hoban (2005) and Ingvarson (2005) studies were carried out a short time after government funding ceased, and the Aubusson study (2005) was carried out whilst QTAL projects were actually being implemented in schools; it is difficult to determine whether action learning, QT and the professional learning cultures that are established during schools' participation in QTAL are sustained over the medium term. Hoban (2005) and Ingvarson (2005) both identified the need to monitor whether a professional learning culture developed through a school's involvement in QTAL is sustained over a longer timeframe.

There are enough parallels between QTAL and current professional learning programs that raise insights worthy of consideration in relation to schools receiving specific funding for targeted professional learning programs. Whether AGQTP QTAL government funding impacted on the professional learning cultures of schools, and whether the learning was sustained over the medium term has relevance for current and future professional learning programs.

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