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# The School as a Professional Learning Community:

Perspectives from Tasmanian and  
English schools on the essentials for  
creating a community of learning  
in a school

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## Introduction

This project was initiated against a backdrop of significant change to the curriculum in Tasmania. This change created an imperative for all Tasmanian schools to collaborate in order to develop a relevant and stimulating curriculum for their students. One result of this was the development of a professional learning community, involving Cressy District High School and a number of its neighbouring schools.

This research explores headteachers' and principals' perceptions of the key issues affecting the leadership of professional learning communities. It draws upon qualitative data, collected via interviews, from four Tasmanian principals and 12 English headteachers. Their insights into the realities of leading professional learning communities are described in detail in the full report, available at [www.ncsl.org.uk/research/associates](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/research/associates)

The remainder of this paper summarises the main findings from the study.

## Key Understandings

The following statements represent areas of common understanding about the leadership of professional learning communities amongst those 12 headteachers in Tasmania and England who were interviewed, supported by a review of relevant literature.

### The importance of a shared vision and a focus on learning and teaching

Having a vision and educational goals that are shared by the school community is an essential foundation for school change, improvement and success.

A shared vision enables a school to take charge of change. However it is crucial that the school's emphasis is on learning and teaching if the achievement levels of students are to be raised. With shared goals centred on teaching and learning, the whole school is driven forward.

Teachers need to have high expectations of their students. The curriculum needs to link to the goals of the school and a variety of teaching and monitoring strategies need to be implemented.

The school must encourage teachers to study and update teaching skills and strategies. Staff development must be a high priority. With these things in place, classroom improvement will increasingly become a fundamental motivator for whole-school improvement.

Leaders must concentrate on learning to build the appropriate focus of an effective professional learning community. Once established, strategies and ongoing commitment are required for it to be maintained. Learning-centred leadership is highly purposeful in nature and requires the headteacher to understand the learning needs of the school, becoming actively involved in the work of the teachers and the progress of the students. Whilst the role of the headteacher is extremely important, it must be remembered that they cannot possibly fulfill all of the school's needs for learning-oriented leadership. Learning must be the focus for all leaders in the school.

All leaders – and headteachers in particular – need a large knowledge base about learning and teaching to successfully lead and manage change, motivate and manage people and design and align systems, processes and resources (Hill, 2001).

### The importance of teams

Team work in schools needs to be fully supported and promoted as it demonstrates a commitment to shared leadership and collaboration. Teams provide a method of organising a school community and creating job enlargement and job rotation. Teams potentially offer more active involvement in higher level decision-making, supporting the sharing of complex and demanding school management tasks. They also help teachers to improve classroom outputs (Wallace and Hall, 1994).

Team meetings are highly effective learning opportunities where members develop expertise in how to work collaboratively together.

The interviews and literature reviewed highlighted many positive aspects of teams within schools. In particular, a school with effective teams in existence challenges the notion that leadership is the exclusive domain of those in formal leadership positions and supports greater autonomy and broader contributions from across the whole school community.

## The importance of reflection in order to be a good practitioner

Reflecting critically on one's own practice provides a basis for self-improvement. When encouraged more widely across the whole school, it builds expertise and capacity, generating new knowledge and direction. The school leaders interviewed outlined their commitment to the use of various reflective practices and in fact used and modelled the programme itself as a mirror to reflect on their school practices.

Teacher reflection is primarily a personal experience based on impressions. However, thorough and effective monitoring of pupil development in the form of data and student feedback can also be very powerful reflection devices that form a strong basis for improvement. Michael Fullan (2001) suggests that deeper reflection requires other perspectives as well as our own work and suggests options such as team teaching, classroom observation, performance appraisal, collaborative planning, teacher support groups or professional dialogue. He also suggests that we review the purposes and principles that underpin our classroom judgments and the ethics and principles of our actions.

Kruse, Seashore Louis and Bryk (1995) also emphasise the power and value of reflection when they say that,

*"In the end, reflection becomes a form of individual activity and social interaction, carried on among all members of the school community to create joint understandings related to students, learning and pedagogical practice."*

## The importance of context

Each school's context is unique. It informs the ways in which the school community views itself and its approach to learning. Factors influencing this context include the specific location of the school, the nature of the community it serves, the nature of its students and the backgrounds of the staff and teachers who work there. Leaders must know their own and their school's context intimately.

What works in one context may lack relevance in another. As each school's context is different, so must be the approach taken to effect broader school improvement. It is not possible simply to devise a blueprint for all schools (Stoll and Fink, 1996; Hopkins, 2001). Furthermore it is increasingly being realised that sustainable improvement needs to come from within the school community, rather than it being externally mandated (Barth, 1990).

A school working as an effective professional learning community can identify both its own specific needs and challenges for improvement and the particular approaches most suited to addressing these.

## References

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