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The value of collaborative rounds for teacher professional learning in Australia

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Abstract

Teacher professional learning (PL) is increasingly being viewed by governments, bureaucracies, and school systems as an important vehicle for improving teaching quality and effectiveness. This new enthusiasm, however, has to be set against a history of professional development in schools that was of marginal quality and benefit. In response to this history, education authorities are interested in PL that emphasises collaborative, relevant and authentic opportunities for teachers. This paper reports a study investigating the potential of a collaborative rounds-based approach for teacher professional learning conducted across three small primary schools in Western Australia. Using qualitative data gathered over a year, strengths and challenges of the rounds approach are explored. Findings show how this PL supported teacher learning, the perceived influence on classroom instruction and the benefits in working collaboratively. Challenges included time and logistics, overcoming anxiety about being observed and the process of learning observational skills. Implications for future implementation as well as policy and practice are discussed.

Keywords: teacher professional learning, teacher observation, teacher collaboration, Instructional Rounds.

Introduction

As a consequence of governments and education systems placing increased emphasis on notions of teaching quality and effectiveness, authorities have pursued mechanisms devoted to the improvement of teaching through ongoing professional learning (PL) (Bleicher, 2014). Ubiquitous education policy initiatives at the macro scale designed to hold teachers and schools to account for student achievement, such as standardised testing regimes, have developed alongside initiatives with a more micro focus, such as the interest in observation of teachers work for ‘collecting evidence about what goes on in classrooms’ (O’Leary, 2012, p 791-792). The emergence of PL as a policy tool is nested within a wider shift in education systems to use policy as a regulatory tool – ‘steering at a distance’ (Lingard, 2011, p. 370). Thus, while PL can be a driver to enhance teaching quality and student achievement (Leonard, 2015), it must also be seen as part of a policy ensemble interested in new tools of and for governance. For example, in the Australian context, the focus on teacher quality and effectiveness has seen a raft of new policy interventions including the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), the My School website and the creation of the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). This new emphasis on policy levers in Australia is particularly evidenced within the remit of AITSL, a statutory authority which combines regulatory authority over aspects of teacher education, accreditation and teaching standards with responsibility for teacher professional growth.

Of course, this desire to use PL to improve teaching quality has always met head-on the problematic history of professional development in schools ‘derided as fragmented, disconnected from teachers’ work and ineffective in supporting lasting change in schools’ (Burns Thomas and Niesz, 2012, p. 683). Unsatisfactory professional development has often meant that teachers don’t buy-in to new approaches and teaching strategies. In response, there has been an international shift from professional development to PL characterised by

collaborative 'in-house' models (Burns Thomas and Niesz, 2012, Bleicher, 2014, DeLuca *et al.*, 2015). The challenge for PL has been reframed as addressing the problems of authenticity, relevance, practical application and continued impact on classroom practice.

Further, using PL to improve teacher quality must be read against dominant accountability models, particularly those that promote test-based accountability, which many education systems have developed in the last few decades. Whilst in countries like England test-based accountabilities are supplemented by the long history of inspections of schools and teaching (O'Leary, 2012), in Australian education systems the move towards test-based accountabilities is relatively recent with the first NAPLAN tests being sat in 2008. These tests assess literacy and numeracy, and are sat by all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. In 2010, the Federal Government announced that all individual school results on NAPLAN would be publicly available on the My School website. Furthermore, the website enables comparison between statistically 'like' schools as an indicator of quality (Lingard, Thompson & Sellar, 2016). In Australia, as in England and the United States, there has been a number of studies that have argued that this narrow approach to accountability has had unintended consequences (Lingard, Thompson, & Sellar, 2016; Stobart, 2008; Au, 2009; Berliner, 2011). Within this policy context, the need for more "intelligent" forms of accountability (O'Neill, 2013) that cater for and enhance teacher professionalism as an *internal accountability* that calls forth "the energy, motivation, commitment, knowledge and skill of the people who work in schools and the systems that are designed to support them" (Elmore, 2003, p. 195). In this policy climate we agree with Elmore that PL as internal accountability is "a *necessary condition* for schools to be successful in responding to the pressures of external accountability systems" (Elmore, 2003, p. 198).

This paper reports on a collaborative PL network conducted across three small, Catholic primary schools at a time when: a) schools were being encouraged to pursue observation to enhance teacher PL while experiencing budgetary constraints and b) NAPLAN results were being used as a somewhat blunt instrument for comparison and judgment. Small, single-stream (one class per year level) primary schools often report fewer possibilities when it comes to PL as tight budgets can constrain capacity to tailor PL to staff needs. While smaller schools may have closer teacher relationships, there are fewer opportunities for collaboration with teachers teaching the same classes. The protocol for this PL network was based on Instructional Rounds (IR) (City *et al.*, 2009) because this protocol best suited the desire to set up a multi-school network of teachers sharing practice. The aim of the research reported in this paper is to investigate the potential of a collaborative rounds-based approach to teacher PL in small primary schools.

Teacher professional learning (PL) and Instructional Rounds

Professional learning (PL)

Until relatively recently, teacher PL in Australia has relied on formal workshops, day long in-services, talks by experts, and training to use particular learning programs or approaches. Typically such experiences have been scheduled as whole or half day discrete events, and have been referred to in the literature as the ‘drive by’ workshop model of professional development (Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009, p. 46). These isolated experiences focus on transmission of information in the hope that translation into practice will eventuate. Anecdotally, and in the literature, such activities have been viewed as ineffective and isolated from the complexity and reality of the classroom (Opfer and Pedder, 2011), having little impact on teacher PL and even less on improvement in practice and student outcomes.

Current views of PL emphasise the importance of teachers ‘learning how to learn, and transforming their knowledge into practice for the benefit of their students’ growth’ (Avalos, 2011, p. 10). Furthermore, teacher learning should be ‘understood as a complex system rather than as an event’ (Opfer and Pedder, 2011, p. 378), involving a process of constructing understanding, application, experimentation, reflection and problem solving over time. Although teacher learning is a relatively new field of research (Borko *et al.*, 2007) and there have been differing views about what constitutes effective PL for teachers (Garet *et al.*, 2001, Cameron *et al.*, 2013), there seems to be emerging consensus about some key features of effective PL experiences.

There is agreement that PL should be situated in the authentic world of classrooms and ‘engage teachers in concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection that illuminate the processes of learning and development’ (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 2011, p. 82). Learning nested in the real world of classrooms and teaching/learning processes has immediate relevance and value for teachers particularly when new learning can be applied and enacted in a timely manner. Effective teacher learning takes place when the focus is school based and integrated into daily practice (Wideen *et al.*, 1998, Opfer and Pedder, 2011). Furthermore, PL is more effective ‘if teachers from the same school, department, or year level participate collectively’ (Opfer and Pedder, 2011, p. 385). Linked to authentic and situated approaches to PL is the view that effective PL should be ‘connected to and derived from teachers’ work with their students’ (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 2011, p. 82), involving opportunities for teacher-led, inquiry based learning addressing real problems of practice and capitalising on teachers’ desire to maximise the learning of their students.

Research has also emphasized the value of collaboration in teacher PL experiences. Cameron *et al.*, (2013) found teachers valuable PL activities involved working with colleagues, observing lessons and having time to share ideas. When teachers have opportunities to share

knowledge and develop collaborative communities of practice, potentially fruitful environments for PL can be developed, positively influencing teacher outcomes. Collaborative Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for example, has been found to have a positive impact on improvements in teaching and learning, specifically enhanced teacher efficacy, commitment to change in practice and enthusiasm for collaboration (Cordingley *et al.*, 2003). Even so, such approaches can be limited unless they conceptualise teachers as lead learners and emphasise teacher driven learning directly aligned with the specific context of practice (see for example, Armour and Makopoulou, 2012). The approach of Disciplined Collaboration (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014a), where teachers work interdependently with a systematic process of collaborative enquiry, innovation and monitoring impact has been found to have some positive influence on PL and school improvement. Furthermore, the quality of teacher collaboration has been shown to positively influence teacher improvement and student achievement (Ronfeldt *et al.*, 2015).

Although time tends to be an ongoing issue PL, having time and space for PL in the regular school timetable is important (DeLuca *et al.*, 2014). This includes time for group meetings and peer observation, for which teachers may need to be released from their classrooms as well as time to develop, discuss, reflect, apply, practice, review and revisit new learning (Opfer and Pedder, 2011). Intensive and sustained PL over long periods of time has also been shown to be more effective (Yoon *et al.*, 2007).

Professional networks beyond the classroom also provide opportunity for powerful PL (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 2011). Collaborative partnerships with universities, for example, may enable teachers to develop practices that are more theoretically grounded and informed by research. Similarly, networks with teachers in other schools may provide critical

friends to help reflect, and examine practice, exploring alternative possibilities for problem solving outside the dynamic of their own school (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 2011).

Particular approaches to PL have gained popularity over the last decade including lesson study (Lewis and Takahashi, 2013) and coaching/mentoring based models (see for example, Teemant *et al.*, 2014). Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (Hord, 2009) encourage teachers to discuss educational issues, learn by participating in a contextually driven community of practice (Pella, 2011) and reflect on practice supported by various (usually exemplary or experienced) peers (Opfer and Pedder, 2011). Despite a range of approaches to PL gaining popularity in the profession, there is a paucity of empirical research regarding particular approaches. Lawless and Pellegrino (2007) for example argued that while many ‘principles’ of effective PL are articulated in the literature, the empirical evidence to support their effectiveness is generally weak. More recently, Opfer and Pedder (2011) have argued for research about teachers’ PL in the complex professional environments in which they work. This study provides empirical evidence of the potential of a collaborative process for PL in small primary schools.

Instructional Rounds

One approach to PL being advocated by AITSL, the statutory organisation tasked to ‘develop and maintain rigorous Australian professional standards for teaching and school leadership as a school improvement strategy’ is Instructional Rounds (IR) (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014b). IR uses a networked, teacher-teacher observation protocol to improve collective teacher practice (City, 2011). The ‘practice combines three common elements of improvement: classroom observation, an improvement strategy, and a network of educators’ in order to ‘learn to hold one another accountable, individually and collectively’

(City, 2011, p. 36-37). More than an evaluative or supervisory tool, IR provides an inquiry focus on the instructional core rather than the common evaluative focus on the teacher.

There are four elements of rounds; to identify a problem of practice, to collect data through observation, debrief the observations through description (what was seen/heard), analysis (how might the data be grouped) and a challenge to think about the next level of work in response to the observational feedback (City *et al.*, 2009). Observations are organised around a ‘problem of practice’ - a negotiated focus the network ‘cares about, feels stuck on, and wants to understand more deeply’ (City, 2011, p. 38). To be successful, each problem of practice must focus on instruction, be observable and something that teachers can action, should connect to broader improvement goals, and be high leverage (City *et al.*, 2009). High leverage strategies are those that, if acted upon, would make a significant difference to student learning¹ (City *et al.*, 2009). The protocol for IR is dependent upon the intention of the network assembled – a group of district superintendents who do not themselves teach will necessarily develop a different protocol to guide how their time is spent as opposed to a network of classroom teachers. However, what does not change is that in each protocol there is a shared problem of practice, participants spend time observing practice, the focus of observation is on describing what is seen, heard and produced rather than judging lesson effectiveness and that following the observation there is a debrief where the observations are shared. The final stage in each protocol is a commitment to act on the debriefing to improve practice. In this, each protocol is iterative.

An important aspect of IR is that observations are ‘fundamentally descriptive and analytic, not evaluative. At no point do we declare what we see to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ or something that we ‘like’ or ‘don’t like’ (City, 2011, p. 37). Thus, each observation collects data through

¹ In their estimation of what constitutes high leverage strategies, City *et al.* (2009) often rely on Hattie’s meta-analyses of high impact strategies cf. http://www.teacherstoolbox.co.uk/T_effect_sizes.html

addressing three simple, non-judgemental questions: 1. What are teachers saying and doing? 2. What are students saying and doing? 3. What is the task? These questions are descriptive rather than judgemental and force observers to collect evidence rather than provide opinions. Following the observations, teams meet in a shared space and sort the evidence looking for meaningful patterns related to their problem of practice. From here, observers make predictions of the learning that occurred in each class. The final stage involves the group to proposing strategies to improve teaching and learning based on the observation. These strategies are not about 'fixing' teachers or classrooms, rather they are about developing 'clarity about good instructional practice and about the leadership and organisational practices needed' to support teaching and learning in each specific context (City *et al.*, 2009, p. 125).

On face value, IR as a model for PL seems to enable authentic learning focused on teacher-driven problems of practice, encourage collaboration and shared reflection, and is enacted in cycles over a sustained period of time. Some empirical research supports IR as a PL tool. Chew (2013) found the IR process 'supports teachers' ability to collaborate with their colleagues and develop specific skills that foster professional development' (p. 70). As a basis for development of 'Quality Teaching Rounds' Gore and Bowe (2015) found a positive influence on early career teachers' efficacy, professional relationships, commitment and goals, as well as promoting an integrated professional culture in schools.

Even so, Gore and Bowe, (2015) argue the literature regarding rounds is largely 'descriptive and celebratory' (p. 3). Similarly Goodwin *et al.*, (2015) note there is 'comparatively little theoretical analysis or empirical study' (p. 3) regarding IR. Although there is potential for IR to promote quality teaching and have a range of benefits for students, teachers and schools, there needs to be more empirical research to unveil the particular conditions under which the process may be an effective tool for PL.

There is an important caveat that we would add here in that we define our approach as being informed by IR, rather than simply copying the models outlined by City *et al* (2009). This caveat is necessary for two reasons. First, while adopting many of the processes outlined by City *et al.*, (2009) particularly in regards to structuring each rounds visit, we were conscious that in Australia (perhaps unlike the US) the language of instruction is often perceived as promoting a narrowed, instrumental view of pedagogy. In the work this can come across as a simplified understanding of how learning talks place *in situ*. Second, many of the resources suggested by City *et al.*, (2009) are focused more on networks of school and district leaders rather than classroom teachers engaging in peer observation. Logistic realities meant that we had to adapt many of the suggested protocols and time frames to suit the needs and rhythms of busy educational professionals and schools, recognising that each day a teacher is not in their class represents a financial and pedagogic imposition on each school.

Study design

This study was qualitative in nature and was conducted over the four terms of a school year.

Participants

Participants were seven teaching staff from three single stream (one class in each year) primary schools in Western Australia. The Principal of each school volunteered their school's involvement, based on a shared interest in enhancing the PL of their staff. Researchers obtained ethics approval from their university and the participants' employing body. The

schools were all systemic Catholic schools, and each school context drew students from different socioeconomic backgrounds².

As shown in Table 1, all participants were female and were teaching in lower and middle primary years. Three teachers from School A and two teachers each from Schools B and C participated. Teachers either volunteered (School A and C) or were co-opted by their Principals (School B). Participants consented to participate and were aware that they could withdraw at any time.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Phases of the study and data collection

There were three main phases in this study. Data were collected at four time points in phases 2 and 3 as described below.

Phase 1: Establishment phase –Participants attended a full day project information and development seminar facilitated by the researchers. All participants, their Principals and colleagues attended a morning session providing project information and the particular approach to PL used. In the afternoon the researchers worked with network participants to establish a common problem of practice for collaborative rounds and begin practicing observation skills.

² In Australia the Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) score is used to measure relative social advantage. A score of 1000 is the national average. In 2013 across the three schools, School 1 had an ICSEA of 1072, School 2 had an ICSEA of 1170 and School 3 had an ICSEA of 1029. More information regarding ICSEA scores can be found at http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/resources/Guide_to_understanding_2013_ICSEA_values.pdf

Phase 2: Collaborative Rounds Network process – Phase 2 took part over 3 days, each approximately 8-10 weeks apart in line with school terms in Western Australia. Each school ‘hosted’ a collaborative round, where network participants visited and observed lessons of participant teachers who worked at that school. The schedule for each collaborative round was similar. The day began at 8am where the participants were reminded of the protocol for observation (process, time in each class, focus on the evidence of learning based on observation), the **problem of practice (Using strategic questioning and open ended tasks to improve students' mathematical understanding)** and reminded to avoid making judgement during observation. From 9am the group conducted 30-minute classroom observations, moving from one class to another. Time was then spent organising their notes. After morning tea, the debrief session involved teachers being given feedback on their observed lessons limited to what the observers saw, heard and the evidence of student learning. Teachers responded to feedback and gave an overview of what they were trying to achieve in the lesson. During the debrief devices were used to assist teachers organise their observations. Because the problem of practice orienting the group focused on questioning, **Bloom’s taxonomy was used.** This was chosen as a heuristic to guide the debrief after a discussion between the group as it was commonly known and already guided learning conversations in at least two of the schools. After lunch, the debrief addressed how the teachers could take their instruction to the next level, before revisiting the problem of practice and revising if appropriate. Two researchers facilitated the Rounds days and participated in observations, discussions and the debrief. In each successive round, teachers gradually assumed more control over the process as they became more familiar and confident with the protocols and their peers.

At the end of each day, participants completed a short written reflection, responding to questions about what they had learnt, the strengths and challenges experienced, and how the

facilitators might best support their future learning. The purpose of the reflection was to elicit participants' thoughts about their learning at that particular time and to inform future rounds.

Phase 3: Individual interviews / Reflection

Some 4-6 weeks after the conclusion of the last collaborative round, each participant undertook a semi-structured interview with one of the researchers to discuss the collaborative rounds process. The purpose of the interview was to enable in-depth exploration of participants' rounds experiences throughout the year and to better understand the learning journey of individual participants. The questions were intended to generate discussion about participants' experiences of using collaborative rounds for PL, identify strengths and challenges, and elicit any examples of specific instructional change. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and transcripts were sent to participants for review.

Data analysis

Comment [CM1]: Greg, I'm not sure if this is clearer - I can't think of what else to say? What do you think?

Data from the three sets of reflections were entered into a spread sheet for analysis. Individual interviews were transcribed verbatim. Both sets of data were managed and coded using QSR NVivo10.

As the aim of the study was to investigate the potential of a collaborative rounds-based approach to teacher PL, data were analysed for content to identify themes emerging. The reflections and the interviews were first analysed broadly to identify participants' perceptions of the strengths and challenges of the Rounds process. Next, strengths were coded for content and subthemes developed where 5 or more participants described the idea and the idea appeared in a minimum of two data sources. Ten subthemes (as shown in Table 2) were identified as strengths and these were grouped into three broader themes: supporting teacher

PL, perceived influence on instruction, and working in a PL community. The challenges were then examined and three main challenges were identified: expectations and concerns, learning to observe, and time and logistics. Because participants were only asked about challenges in the interview, the themes were developed using interview data only.

To enhance the validity and reliability of the data analysis, three researchers (two of whom facilitated the Rounds) were involved in the analysis process. An independent researcher was also involved to verify themes emerging. The initial broad coding according to strengths and challenges was conducted by the independent researcher who had not been involved in the research process. After strengths and challenges were identified, the researchers met to discuss themes emerging. The development of themes and subthemes occurred through discussions between the researchers who agreed regarding the coding and development of themes and revisited the data where appropriate to confirm.

Findings

Data analysis from the three rounds and interview revealed particular strengths and challenges regarding the potential of collaborative rounds for PL in schools. Table 2 shows the themes and subthemes and relative strength of each theme through frequency of coding and number of participants who referred to the theme. The section below discusses each theme in more detail using data from reflections (R1, R2 or R3) and interviews to illustrate.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Strengths

Supporting teacher PL

Participants stated that participating in collaborative rounds supported their PL through encouraging learning and reflection for improvement, building awareness about instruction and receiving objective, specific feedback.

All participants described how collaborative rounds encouraged their own learning, reflection and improvement. Amanda specifically valued the practical, 'hands-on' experience:

You did it. You discussed it...What we got from our observations we worked with quite a bit. We wrote them out. We discussed them. We grouped them together.

(Amanda, interview)

Participants noted specific learning related to 'different types of questioning' (Beth, R3), 'how to ask more evaluative questions' (Catherine, R2), 'how to broaden an open-ended task even more to help children use higher order thinking skills' (Caitlin, R3) and 'how to make lessons include more higher order thinking' (Beth, R3). Other skills such as 'how to observe without looking at anything else and being objective' (Catherine, interview) and 'to be flexible to encourage the children to think of more than one answer' (Bianca, R3) were also described.

The process also prompted self-reflection through observations and discussion during the debrief session, providing a reminder 'to 'take the time' to reflect' (Abbey, R1). Bianca reported she had 'definitely been reflecting a lot more' (interview) resulting in weekly adjustments to formal planning. Amanda described how the process 'made me really look at my teaching' (interview). As an experienced teacher who acknowledged going 'through the motions', the rounds process enabled her to 'constructively' examine her classroom practice

and 'freshen up my teaching a bit'. For less experienced teachers the process also prompted improvement – 'it opened my eyes not only to ways to improve my teaching practice but also another way to assess children in my class' (Caitlin, R3).

Building awareness about instruction, specifically use of questioning strategies, was also described. Participants reported being more 'aware of just how important strategic questioning can be in allowing students the opportunity for higher order thinking' (Angela, R3) and having a 'more heightened awareness of the need for higher order questions' (Amanda, R3).

Receiving objective, specific feedback from colleagues also contributed positively to participants' PL. It was important that observations 'were not judgments but of the things they saw/heard happening' (Angela, R1), focused on the students, 'strictly feedback on what the kids are doing', and directed at improvement, giving 'something to work on to improve your teaching (Angela, interview). Feedback also provided information about student engagement, evidence of learning and informed planning. 'I found the feedback useful. It gave me ideas of where to go from here.' (Amanda, R1)

Perceived influence on instruction

All participants perceived changes in their instruction, specifically with regard to use of strategic questioning, intentional planning and open-ended tasks.

Beth described thinking more about instruction during lessons. 'I will say something and think, if I just re-worded it a little bit you could have got a much better answer and got the kids thinking a lot more' (interview). Bianca explained how using strategic questioning provided opportunities for students 'to think a bit more openly'. She noted 'thinking about

more what I am asking... I have noticed I am asking less easy questions' (interview). Caitlin acknowledged 'definitely little things have changed in the way I question ... I really do think about my questioning ... trying to get them to think a bit deeper and to think differently ... think out of the box' (interview).

The rounds process also had an influence on teacher planning. Angela reported she would 'structure and plan questions in advance of lessons' (R2) and Caitlin admitted 'it did make me change the way I would normally plan' providing 'a different way to actually look at how to teach that content in an open-ended way' (interview). Caitlin and Angela also described the impact changes in instruction had on student learning with students 'really responded to it (open-ended tasks) as well' (Caitlin, interview) and changes in learning behaviour with open-ended tasks.

They know now. Ms T wants more than one way. You can't just give her one way anymore. They say that straight away which is really good. You can see them changing too... they are not rushing to complete their work anymore... They will sit there and really concentrate on the task... They actually think about it. (Angela, interview)

Working in a PL community

The PL community developed was valuable for all participants. Working collaboratively, engaging in professional conversations, having the opportunity to work with teachers from other schools, and the perceived trust, safety and sense of community were specifically mentioned.

The strength of 'working collaboratively' (Bianca, interview) was discussed by the majority of teachers. Particularly in the debrief session, collaboration enabled teachers to 'really

understand what was happening in the classroom' (Angela, interview) by hearing what colleagues had observed from the lesson. 'It wasn't just my eyes. It was a lot of eyes and we all came together and shared our information' (Beth, interview). Colleagues were also 'great in facilitating conversation and really getting us to analyse our observations' (Caitlin, R1) as well as offering 'insightful' and 'relevant' (Angela, R1) observations.

Working collaboratively also provided an avenue for professional conversations whereby colleagues 'prompted with questions and examples if I was unsure' (Angela, R2), 'gave alternative views to think about' (Caitlin, R2) and suggested ways 'to help each other' (Bianca, interview). Professional conversations with peers 'encouraged us to think outside the square in terms of our thinking, teaching and observation' (Beth, R1). As a new teacher, Catherine stated 'it was fantastic to have the time to discuss our teaching and how we can make it better'. Although the conversations were 'quite informal' this was seen as advantageous, as 'the comfort in the group was good' (Amanda, interview). Professional conversations also improved during the process. 'I think that is something that we all got better at; communicating ideas, communicating strategies' (Bianca, interview). 'The sharing side of the network is great and the fact we know it is non judgemental makes it easy to listen to and hear. I like the talk!!' (Amanda, R1). Observing in another school was also advantageous 'because you have got no idea of the background of the kids' (Amanda, interview) enabling more objective and focused observation and limiting opportunities to be 'distracted with students I knew' (Caitlin, interview).

From the outset, participants reported feeling comfortable in the community. 'I felt I was in a group that could be open and honest with each other. I felt challenged to think about my practice and was happy to be open to feedback.' (Bianca, R1). Most participants specifically commented on the sense of trust and community that developed within the group. This was

largely attributed to the process and the non-judgemental feedback provided after the observations.

I think it was a common feeling that it was so important the way we read our observations and that gave us a sense of community, that we are all on the same page ... and it gave us a safe network that we knew we weren't being judged which was so important... I felt safe to just contribute. I felt safe for people to watch and comment on my lesson. I didn't feel like anyone was attacking me (Angela, interview).

Challenges

Two main challenges were identified. Participants described overcoming the challenge of being observed by colleagues and the time and logistics involved in the process.

Responses to being observed by colleagues

All participants admitted being initially apprehensive about the process and nervous about being observed by colleagues.

It was overwhelming because there was a lot to take in ... and to think that you wouldn't just be going into watch somebody else but eventually they would all be coming in to watch you as well ... I thought, what have I got myself into? (Beth, interview).

For some teachers, the thought of being observed brought back negative memories of having their teaching assessed at university. 'We have this very negative image ... all the way from when you go to Uni. When you go out on your pracs [professional experience] we are going to assess you and tell you what you are doing wrong.' (Abbey, interview). For early career

teachers this memory was quite recent and Catherine stated 'I never enjoyed that at Uni. I kept kicking myself thinking, why did I put myself in that position again?' (Catherine, interview). Even so, all participants described the feedback they received as informative and useful.

Teachers described the importance of learning how to observe and how to feel about being observed, as Angela stated 'probably one of the first challenges is to get your head around that someone is not in the room to look at you' (interview). The skill of learning to write objective notes and focus on what could be seen and heard in relation to the problem of practice also developed over time. 'I kind of got in a rhythm of writing down what the teacher did, what the students did and the evidence of learning' (Caitlin, interview). 'Once you got your head around that, really it was just a matter of opening yourself up to the idea of rounds and going for it' (Abbey, interview). Similarly, Bianca noted the importance of learning the process – 'It was just learning that process. You have to be okay with travelling through because I think once you had your turn at being watched it was okay' (Bianca, interview). Amanda noted 'Every time we met, there was a light bulb moment ... it was really good because it made me really look at my teaching' (interview).

Angela described the transition from focusing on the teacher to the students and the impact that had on her experience.

We all started off looking, I guess, at what the teacher was doing and not focussing on the students. It was only once I saw that we were really just focussing on, 'are the students learning? If they are not learning, how can we change what we are doing to help them learn?' that I really grasped what we are really actually looking for. I think that is when it finally clicked for me ... That is when I think it was actually valuable...

At that point, I was like, okay it is not about us. It is really about the students. Are they learning? What can we do to change? (Angela, interview)

Time and logistics

A challenge that was less easily overcome was time and logistics. Even though having days away from their own school was deemed advantageous in many respects, it meant ‘stopping what we were doing in our school to be with each other’ and created disruption for teachers of very young students who may perceive their teacher as ‘a third mum - if I am not there, the whole world collapses, no matter what relief teacher’ (Abbey, interview). This highlighted the need for ‘school community and your school parents’ to be supportive ‘knowing that the teachers are doing this to improve their teaching standards and therefore the outcomes for the children’ (Abbey, interview). Having staff away from school and funding relief teachers for those days was also a consideration.

From the teachers’ perspective, more benefits than limitations of participating in the Rounds process were voiced, however there were genuine concerns about how the process might work in their own schools and how sustainable the process would be in their small schools. The following section explores these issues further.

Discussion and implications

This study investigated the value of a collaborative rounds-based approach to PL rounds for teachers in three small single stream primary schools. These sites were selected because of the unique challenges associated with supporting PL for teachers in small schools. Overall, the findings show there is merit in the approach, with participating teachers reporting that involvement in the rounds process impacted on their teaching, reflection and classroom

practice. Of particular significance was that the process supported teachers, regardless of experience, in building awareness of how they conducted lessons, and opportunities for improvement, refinement and consolidation. In this section we discuss the findings, share our reflections as facilitators and observers, and discuss implications for future PL and research.

The data suggested a number of positive characteristics of a collaborative rounds approach.

The authentic nature of the PL was deemed as a highly positive aspect of the process. In contrast to teachers' previous experiences of PL, the authentic nature of the process increased engagement and motivation. Similarly, the 'immediacy' about their learning increased the value and relevancy of the experience as it stemmed from, and informed their daily work.

Collaboration was valuable as working together on a shared problem of practice enhanced the shared learning and expertise of the network, rather than only individuals. Whether they were the observers or being observed, the process promoted a collaborative ethic. These findings are aligned with research highlighting the benefits of authentic, collaborative PL, nested in the real world of classroom teaching (Wideen *et al.*, 1998, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 2011, Opfer and Pedder, 2011, Cameron *et al.*, 2013).

In terms of improvement in teaching practice much of the reflection was aligned with the problem of practice regarding how to use questioning more effectively. Even so, many of the teachers' reflections regarding instruction moved beyond questioning to student engagement, evidence of learning and support required to improve practice. The rounds process seemed to encourage collaborative reflection and group problem-solving focused on authentic observations. Although there was some preliminary support for improvement in teaching practice, the evidence in this study is self-report and draws on teachers' own perceptions. In other studies, empirical research regarding the influence of instructional collaboration on teacher improvement and student achievement provides 'suggestive evidence that collaboration in instructional teams can improve teacher and school performance' (Ronfeldt *et*

al., 2015, p. 506), yet further research is needed to unpack how particular models of collaboration might contribute to such findings. In addition, the field would benefit from mixed method studies that include structured classroom observations.

So were there particular aspects of the process that contributed to its merit? One critical aspect was that the observations remained non-judgemental. For observations to develop into collaborative, networked PL, all participants were clear that non-judgment was critical. This was maintained through use of language, where observations were objective, focusing on what was seen and heard, rather than evaluative statements. The focus was on a collective approach to the improvement of teaching, rather than a personalisation of value as the problem of the teacher. This was initially difficult for the participants, perhaps a reflection that so much of teaching is judgements, but over time the participants improved. It was vital during this development to have some simple protocols to guide both observation and debrief that reminded participants of 'learning to see, unlearning to judge' (City *et al.*, 2009). We began each rounds day by reflecting on the 3 questions identified by City *et al.*, (2009, p. 88) (What are the teachers doing and saying? What are the students doing and saying? What is the task?) and using these to direct the observations. In each debrief, participants were reminded to only focus on those 3 questions in outlining what they observed. This was a critical step because it promoted confidence in the group, both in the process and with each other, that they were not going to be judged.

A second aspect seemed to be group membership and dynamic. As researchers we remained very interested in the importance of individual characteristics and group dynamics in influencing the success (or lack of it) of a Rounds process. Who volunteers seems crucial. As Table 1 shows, this network was made up of female teachers who had been teaching from 1-20 years. As well, they were predominantly focused in the Early Years of schooling. It seemed as though the process was more beneficial for teachers with a few years experience

and who had spent some years in their current school so were immersed in the culture. We posit that a few years teaching experience is beneficial because it ensures teachers have more developed instructional skills to showcase for the learning of the group and understand the feedback they are given. Unlike Gore and Bowe's (2015) study which showed positive effects of QT Rounds for early career teachers, this study raised questions about the suitability of being observed by more experienced peers for early career teachers. Consideration of teacher disposition and confidence should be undertaken prior to early career teacher observation.

On a related note, we wondered about the utility of Rounds for teachers who were struggling in multiple aspects of their teaching. Teachers who lacked confidence, for example in their ability, classroom management or content knowledge, seemed to us to make the least progress in improving their instructional skills. The teachers who seemed to us to experience most growth from the process were those that seemed the more competent (as opposed to outstanding) in their classroom lessons. With a high degree of competence in teaching and planning, these teachers used the process to fine tune and reinvigorate their teaching, focusing on student learning. Furthermore, these teachers appeared more confident with moving out of their comfort zones to take risks and share challenges and highlights with colleagues. As a mechanism for reinvigorating mid-career teachers, the process seemed to be effective:

If anything, I've probably sparked up a bit teaching wise... it has made me look at myself so therefore I feel like I am probably getting more from the kids which makes me ... I don't feel so downtrodden sometimes.' (Amanda – interview).

As found in other studies (e.g. Cameron *et al.*, 2013) career stage influences motivation for PL and how teachers engage with and respond to PL opportunities.

Pre-existing relationships between teachers seemed also to influence the success or otherwise of the process. The three teachers at School A had worked together for a number of years and

seemed to provide ongoing support for one another in between network days. Teachers from Schools B and C were either new graduates, or new to their school. Participating in an inter-school Rounds process appeared to be additionally challenging for those who were also establishing themselves in a new school environment. Furthermore, teachers new to a school can struggle to transfer their learning to the wider staff, impacting on the ability for cultural change at the school level. Pre-existing collaborative relationships, particularly between teachers who have previously worked together and developed a 'sense of professional trust' (DeLuca *et al.*, 2014, p. 9), seemed to act as a support for deep engagement with the Rounds process.

As the relationship between members of the network developed and the process evolved, we also observed how the process afforded authentic leadership opportunities for teachers in developing ideas and practices around instructional leadership. As we intentionally reduced our input in Rounds 2 and 3, we created space for leaders to emerge. Some teachers grew in confidence and began leading discussions, supporting and scaffolding the learning of their peers. Towards the end of the year discussions began about how Rounds might be implemented in their own schools. Teachers were cognisant of how Rounds may be initially perceived by colleagues and the potential challenges. As Angela noted, 'teachers straight away get their backs up when someone comes into their classroom' (interview) and Amanda explained, 'you really need your admin ... your leaders to really be fully behind it. If they can't sell it to the staff you are going to face negativity all the way along' (interview).

This raises a challenge for the networked approach to rounds utilised in this study: getting the rest of the staff to buy-in. At the start of the process the school principals wanted the teachers participating in the networked rounds to instigate rounds for staff at the school level. However, if this was an overall objective for the schools, it was not realised by the end of the first year. Transferring the learning from the network to each individual school is the next

piece of the puzzle, and perhaps the most important, in realising the potential and ambition of Rounds to bring about school cultures focused on improving instruction.

As well, one of the things that we noticed, and was commented on by the participants, was the intensity of the school week in these schools. In short, they were so busy and the school week so packed with activities, commitments and events that it was often difficult to find time when all three schools, and seven teachers, were available. When added to concerns expressed about the crowded curriculum, and how difficult it was to cover all of the content and skills expected in all of the learning areas, it was not unusual for teachers to feel guilty taking a day off to undertake Rounds. As noted in other research, time and space are important environmental structures to support teacher collaboration and PL (DeLuca *et al.*, 2014).

Another potential problem is that Rounds in its most superficial forms could be a vehicle for sharing mediocre instruction as teachers tend towards politeness and congeniality rather than engaging in collegial, professional conversations which ‘probe more deeply into teaching and learning’ (Nelson *et al.*, 2010, p. 175). This is an important distinction, for Rounds to work it must be grounded in honest, open, substantive and professional feedback, which at times may be critical but constructive. Identifying and giving feedback of this nature is a skill that requires time to develop and foster. One important aspect of our process was the role of the external facilitator in supporting the development and confidence of the participants as well as modelling collegial dialogue and asking challenging questions. It was also seen that having a knowledgeable leader/facilitator was important to ‘spur (the group) on’, provide stimulus for ongoing learning and prevent ‘stagnation’ (Abbey, interview). Our observation was that the part of the process teachers found most challenging was identifying and framing the problem of practice and then working out avenues for continued development. The role of the facilitators in this study to ‘drip feed’ (Catherine, interview) teachers and scaffold teachers’

learning was seen as critical to the success of Rounds, perhaps highlighting the importance of school/university partnerships.

Limitations

However, while there were many positives of the rounds process from the perspective of the teachers, there emerged a number of limitations that schools looking at Rounds as a process need to consider. The first limitation concerned the problem of logistics, time (Chew, 2013) and cost (Cameron *et al.*, 2013). In small, single-stream primary schools that wanted to collaborate with other schools to broaden their pedagogical toolbox so to speak, having classroom teachers out of the school for 1-2 days every term as they undertook observation could be disruptive for the school. As well, given tightening school budgets, paying for relief teachers was a significant financial commitment for schools, perhaps in comparison to alternative PL models. In larger schools this may be less of an issue as internal relief arrangements could be used to cover classes, but in small primary schools this is not an option.

In this instance although the process successfully supported teachers who were experienced and confident with their teaching it seemed less successful in improving the instruction of teachers who were inexperienced and less confident. Whether this was due to the particular characteristics of the teachers or the Rounds process itself is unclear. It does pose questions though about how PL of this nature may best support teachers whose instruction would benefit from most development. In addition, how this might occur without outside facilitators is also worth investigating. For this peer approach to be sustainable, we would argue that the reliance on the university-based facilitators needs to diminish over time so that teachers begin to lead their networks. And, for some participants, this seemed to be an emerging trait,

particularly the more experienced teachers already used to working in collaborative teams.

However, this was not true for all the participants.

This study also comes with the obvious caveat that as student performance data was not collected, the impact on student learning cannot be quantified. The reasons for this were twofold, firstly measuring the effects of a change in instructional culture on student achievement requires a longitudinal approach, and secondly, given the messy or noisy nature of classroom interactions, making causal claims about interventions is difficult, and requires a much larger sample than this study. As well, the nature of the Rounds process is intended to change professional cultures, to:

create a setting in which people can learn a new kind of professional practice, be connected to peers who are in the same learning process, and, over time, take control of their learning and make it relevant to the specific problems they face' (Elmore, 2007, p. 24).

Changing institutional culture takes years to effect, the efficacy of Rounds in this regard could not be sustained by the research design. However, this pilot study does suggest that it would be worthwhile investing time and resources into a larger study.

Conclusion

The challenge for school systems to provide quality, targeted and relevant opportunities for PL across multiple sites is immense. This is particularly the case when education policy interventions appear more focused on competition, performative metrics, evaluations and the associated negative contexts. However, there remains possibilities within performative cultures to refocus efforts on collaborative inquiry, non-judgement and shared responsibility

for improvement. Within this context, a study interested in the specific characteristics of the rounds process for supporting improved instruction is particularly timely. Overall, from the perspective of the teachers involved, it appeared that a rounds approach to collaborative PL network was largely successful in overcoming the challenges of isolation that many small primary schools experience. Teachers reported that their participation impacted on their classroom practice and improved their reflection on their in-lesson teaching. Key facets of the rounds approach were that it was non-judgemental, flexible in that it allowed participants to tailor their inquiry around a problem of practice and work through this collaboratively. However, a rounds process is not without its challenges, particularly in regards to the resources required to adequately support the process and the characteristics of the teachers who participate. There remain questions to be answered about rounds regarding the long-term impact on student achievement and the sustainability of the model once external support and facilitation is no longer as easily accessed.

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