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## **In-school professional development: supporting teachers with the inclusion of critical literacy in their classrooms**

### **Abstract**

The voluminous literature within the field of teacher professional development presents varied components of what constitutes meaningful professional development experiences for teachers. The case reported herein describes how components identified from an analysis of the literature have been incorporated within an in-school model of professional development to support primary teachers as they explore their literacy teaching within their own school and individual classrooms. These ongoing, in-school professional development experiences aimed to support and encourage pedagogical change as the teachers reviewed their classroom teaching and learning practices with emphasis on critical literacy. The importance of the school professional culture, the organisation of time, professional relationships, the location for professional development, and the need for purposeful interactions will each be explored in the description of the experiences.

### **Introduction**

The professional development of teachers has been long identified as a major challenge facing contemporary education (for example Hoban, 2002; Holly and Mcloughlin, 1989). The current climate of accountability, outcome based education and standardisation in assessment, demand that teachers have greater understanding of learning theories and pedagogy to develop and support their classroom practice. Many countries, including Australia, have established professional standards and milestones for teachers in the last decade. While the development of professional standards aim for "...professional enhancements which lead to improvements in both teaching and learning, and in student outcomes" (Boston, 2002, p. 11), the need for teachers to be supported with their professional understandings and applications of this to classroom practice have become more imperative than ever before. The links between theory and practice are acknowledged as a "creative tension" where the tension lies "...between developing professional teaching standards per se, and 'living these out' in everyday learning environments" (Cumming, 2002, p. 3).

Just what constitutes professional development is shaped by a variety of understandings within the literature. Fullan (1991) defines professional development as “the sum total of formal and informal learning experiences throughout one’s career from pre-service teacher education to retirement” (p. 326-327). Guskey and Huberman (1995) further identify, “professional development can also be viewed as a dynamic process that spans one’s entire career in the profession, from preparation and induction to completion and retirement” (p. 133). It is undisputed that teachers’ learning is continuous throughout their professional experience, with professional development and professional growth being interrelated, one unable to occur without the other. Mevarech (1995) reinforces this by writing that professional development opportunities “...are assumed to be important stimuli for teachers’ professional growth” (p. 151). Further, Danielson (1996) states, “continuing development is the mark of a true professional, an ongoing effort that is never completed” (p. 115).

Elliott (1991) asserts that professional development is more than just experiences teachers have - “Professional development is the individualistic and possessive process of acquiring techniques” (p. 106). Professional development opportunities often impart knowledge and various classroom techniques that may be able to be employed to support such knowledge. If we are to use this definition from Elliott, we need to consider that professional development is more than just the input component and that in fact it hasn’t occurred unless the individual teacher has demonstrated ‘possession’ of the techniques. This relates to Whitehead’s (1998) assertion that opportunities for professional development need to support teachers on their journey to self-understanding. Put simply, a teacher needs to know his/her professional development and the impact of this on his/her classroom practice. Dialogue about professional development experiences and its relationship to their classroom practice “...can influence a teacher’s self-understanding and stimulate new direction for practical inquiry” (Elliott, 1991, p. 108).

Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) argue that professional development “...involves more than changing teachers’ behavior ... it also involves changing the person the teacher is” (p. 7). Fundamental to this is the understanding that professional development must impact upon ‘teaching behavior’ but also the teacher’s beliefs about how this

impacts upon how children learn. They argue that it must be acknowledged: "...teacher development is also a process of personal development" (p.7). Indeed, the role of the teacher has changed significantly in recent times. This changing role needs to be addressed within professional development opportunities in order to best support classroom-teaching practice.

Professional development opportunities provided for teachers are typically varied. Too often, teachers are seen as 'empty vessels' waiting to be filled with teaching knowledge through professional development opportunities. Johnson and Golombek (2002) write, "for more than a hundred years, teacher education has been based on the notion that knowledge about teaching and learning can be 'transmitted' to teachers by others" (p. 1). Teachers need to be acknowledged individually for what they bring to the profession and work from their own starting points on their individualised areas of need. Teachers need to see the value in professional development for their personal teaching practice and must be supported in its implementation by those in leadership roles and by the school community at large.

The 'best' and 'most appropriate' ways to provide professional development for teachers is a significant challenge. Teachers have much knowledge about the nature of learning; created from their own experiences as a learner, the input they receive through their tertiary training and input from professional development opportunities undertaken. This creates, as Nicol (1997) describes, a "wealth of knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning" (p. 97). However, these beliefs, while well formed and powerful, are often resistant to responding to curriculum change. The community at large expects teachers to keep abreast of current thinking with regard to the teaching of literacy practices and accommodate for this within their classroom practice. Teacher professional development needs to be responsive to this call however, finding a clear pathway through the literature with vision for implementation requires investigation.

Connelly and Clandinin (1999) state, "the field of curriculum is – to put it bluntly – a maze" (p. 27). Literacy education is testament to this. There is much literature available in which experts indicate their beliefs about how children best learn literacy practices, and the most important literacy practices for their success within society.

Significant paradigm shifts have occurred regarding what constitutes sound literacy practices. In recent times it appears few can actually agree on the fundamentals, that is what is basic and essential for literacy education. Teachers are called upon to find a path through this maze as they make decisions about classroom teaching and learning experiences.

The need for readers to develop critical literacy skills has emerged as an area of particular interest over the past decade. What was once considered a focus to be included in secondary classrooms, is now promoted across the grades within primary school contexts. The four resources model presented by Luke and Freebody (1999), and their discussion of the ‘text analyst’ role has done much to increase teacher awareness of this important part of the role of a reader. The document “In Teachers’ Hands” released by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training in 2005 states that this model “...has been widely accepted by curriculum writers, teacher educators and practitioners in the English learning area” (p. 8).

Christie (2005) describes critical literacy as “...a term intended to capture a pedagogical concern to develop users of literacy who are critical and questioning about what they read, as well as discriminating about how they use writing themselves” (p. 5). Blair-Larsen and Vallance (1999) emphasise the importance of the “...multidimensional thinking process” where the “...interaction of the reader, the text, and the context as readers make critical connections between their prior knowledge and new-found knowledge” (p. 37). Opportunity to engage with discussion about text - before, during and after the reading experience – is crucial in supporting students to make connections between the text, their experiences and their view of the world. Ensuring that this is not an ‘inquisition’ (Cramer, 1994) is important and the need for teachers to structure experiences in a supportive, inclusive and meaningful way is paramount.

The need for teachers to understand critical literacy and to be able to plan and implement appropriate and meaningful classroom experiences is crucial. Education Queensland (2002, cited by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005) identified that teachers need to be able to engage in “...explicit discussion of talk and writing about how written and spoken texts work,

about their features, characteristics, patterns, genres or discourses” (p. 7) to teach sophisticated literacy concepts such as critical literacy. More effective teachers are identified as those who understand complex literacy processes, have a range of teaching practices to use within the classroom, structure the learning environment to incorporate these understandings as they continually monitor the learning gains of the students (Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005).

## **The Project**

The research reported in this paper aimed to present professional development experiences focused on critical literacy to a cohort of teachers in meaningful and coherent ways. This project was conducted over the course of two academic years in one primary school located in a small coastal community on the south coast of New South Wales, Australia. The school is in a mid to high socio economic area and had an average enrolment of 380 students throughout the duration of the project.

The second named researcher had been employed at the school for a period of 12 years and held an executive position, assuming responsibility for literacy across the grades. She was in the unique position of having awareness of previous directions the school had moved within, having established professional relationships with many of the staff, understanding of previous professional development activities that had been offered, and knowledge of priority focus areas within the school. The first named researcher, an experienced primary teacher who was now employed at the local university, assumed the role of academic partner. She had had previous experience establishing and maintaining in-school professional development experiences and had interest and expertise with literacy teaching in primary classroom contexts. The researchers had an established professional relationship prior to beginning this project.

Each of the teachers of Stage Two (Grades 3 and 4) and Stage Three (Grades 5 and 6) within the school were invited to be involved in the professional development experiences focused on critical literacy. Each of these teachers expressed interest in being involved in the project, and provided the researchers with informed consent.

Table 1 presents an overview of each of these participant teachers at the beginning of the project. There is a notable range of experience and expertise amongst participants. As the project spanned two academic years, there were some personnel changes. New personnel incorporated within the focus stages were included in the professional development experiences.

Name	Age	Gender	Years teaching	2005 grade	2006 grade	Previous grades taught
Peter	48	Male	27	3	7	4-6
Kirsty	23	Female	2	3	3	2
Phillip	47	Male	25	4	4	3-6
Molly	45	Female	18	4	4	1,3
Melinda	34	Female	12	5	5	1,3
Brian	53	Male	29	5	5	2-6
Jane	46	Female	10	6	6	2,4
Kim	32	Female	9	6	6	K,4
Sue	43	Female	26	6	3	K,4
Maria	42	Female	5	1	3	1

**Table 1:** Overview of Participant Teachers

The named researchers adopted the action research approach (Kemmis, 1999; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Stringer, 1996), housed within the qualitative research tradition, as the project methodology. This approach enabled the researchers to plan, implement and reflect upon the professional development experiences as they happened over the course of the project.

*Identification of a professional development focus area within classroom literacy experiences*

The leadership team, within the inquiry school, collected extensive data from the Basic Skills Results, NSW University Tests and School Based Assessments, over a two year period (2003-2004) with the aim of using this data to inform and drive the



learning and teaching programs within Stages Two and Three (Grades 3 – 6). As Literacy Coordinator K-6, the second named researcher identified the importance and potential of critical literacy as a tool to incorporate higher order thinking and problem solving opportunities for students to engage in. Further, she could foresee the impact on student learning if teachers developed a repertoire of teaching strategies to incorporate critical literacy in connection with everyday literacy practices. Shannon (1995) asserts: “Critical Perspectives push the definition of literacy beyond traditional decoding or encoding of words in order to reproduce the meaning of text to recognize connections between one’s life and the social structure to act on this new knowledge” (p.83). Many of the students in Stages 2 and 3 were identified to have reading strategies firmly in place and taking Shannon’s advice, the second named researcher identified the need for students to engage in learning tasks that would encourage them to be critical thinkers. Further, it was identified that staff needed to extend their knowledge of reading and subsequent classroom practice. Engaging with professional development focused on critical literacy was seen as an opportunity for teachers to embrace change and take risks by moving away from traditional teaching methods for reading instruction.

### **Structuring professional development experiences in response to this**

The development of on-going, in-school professional development experiences stemmed from the identified need of teachers working within Stages Two and Three (Grades Three to Six) at the focus school. Particular emphasis for the professional development experiences was to support teachers as they plan and implement critical literacy session within their classrooms, with opportunity to review these in connection with student learning. Both researchers met regularly throughout the duration of the project to plan appropriate experiences. Typically, the flow throughout the project was:

- Pre-workshop Professional reading to complete
- Workshop
  - Discussion of the reading
  - Sharing of pre-session tasks
  - Input
  - Practical workshop experience
  - Goal setting

Post-workshop            Pre-session task to complete

In our analysis of each of the eight cycles that made up the two-year project, a number of key contributors emerged in the development, implementation and evaluation of these experiences.

School professional culture

The professional culture that exists within a school, provides significant implications and considerations for the organisation and structure of professional development activities. It was important that the experiences offered throughout the project demonstrated awareness of the needs of the school with regard to the English curriculum and for professional development experiences to support this while recognising the individual areas of expertise and experience amongst the participant teachers. The experiences needed to build upon these foundations and support and extend the professional working relationships within the school.

We believe that the professional culture of the school in which teachers are employed is crucial to their embrace of professional development opportunities. Indeed, we found that when the participant teachers were given responsibility for their own professional decisions, were supported through the leadership of the school and acknowledged for what they bring to the identity of the profession, they became empowered. This outcome is clearly supported in the literature, which acknowledges the importance of support from the school leadership and the provision of time and resources to professional development (for example, Darling- Hammond, 1997; Hoban, 2002).

Location for the professional development

We believe that teacher professional development opportunities need to take place within the context of the individual school where teachers are employed. Promoting the notion of ‘partnership’ between individual teachers and their school ensures that professional development experiences are responsive to individual needs while still meeting the requirements of school policy and expectations, system expectations and syllabus documents. Operating the project at the ‘chalk-face’ enabled us to work with

teachers in the situation where support was most needed and most relevant. One participant described the experiences as being “...*much more valuable in your own setting with your own colleagues, in your own professional situation. Much better than an after school inservice*”.

The structure of the experiences provided participant teachers with support to implement and trial new ideas with professional guidance, assistance and encouragement from the researchers and teacher colleagues. A team of people were involved which meant that networks could be established between others with the same experiences who were working towards similar goals.

### Organisation of time

Time can be considered as ‘currency’ within schools. If these teachers and this school can be considered representative and typical of most primary schools, it would be valid to claim that if time is allocated to professional development initiatives, it will be deemed to be important by the teachers participating and therefore, worthy of their time.

However, it is how this time is allocated and used that was critical in this project. We found that it is vital that time needs to be frequent, regular, scheduled and focused in order to support teacher professional development. In particular, we found that time needed to be allocated in five main areas, each of which we will explore.

#### *Time for input*

Opportunity to engage in regular, scheduled input sessions moved the project forward. We aimed to meet formally for a half-day workshop in stage teams one to two times each term (at least four times each year). These workshops were planned by both researchers and led by the academic partner. One participant teacher described, “*Having these workshops has made myself and my students more competent and confident*”.

While an initial focus on critical literacy was set for the project, we did not know what direction these workshops would take over the two year period. Each workshop was planned after extensive reflection on the previous, and careful review of evaluation and feedback from the teachers. Input presented needed to be in response to the needs of the participant teachers. An overview of workshops presented over the two-year period is presented below.

1. Incorporating critical literacy in modeled reading episodes
2. Incorporating critical literacy in guided reading episodes
3. Where does critical literacy fit with visual literacy?
4. Text selection for critical literacy (including community and ICLT)
5. Introducing visual literacy
6. Incorporating visual literacy within classroom experiences
7. Digital Literacy – critically reading ICLT texts
8. Digital Literacy – authentic incorporation of technology within literacy experiences

Prior to each workshop participants were given a professional reading which needed to be completed prior to the workshop. We found that this gave the participants a ‘taste’ of what was to come, while also preparing them to engage in higher-order professional dialogue as they came to the sessions, with increased awareness, questions and issues to clarify. One participant described, “*Reading up to date research papers enhances my knowledge. Knowing current practices can only benefit the school and my professional learning.*” Some of the participants identified that they had shared the professional readings with other colleagues not involved with the project, both within and external to the school. Having time to engage in professional reading appeared to increase the confidence of the participant teachers. One teacher described an experience where she attended an external professional development workshop where the presenter made reference to a reading that had been previously focused on in a project workshop. The teacher recalled her increased confidence to talk about the issues within this reading, but also how the experience worked to strengthen the respect for what we were doing in the in-school workshops, the issues were important as others too were talking about them.

### *Time to observe*

Between the formal workshop sessions, time was scheduled for participants to observe each other in their classrooms. Some participants chose to physically visit classrooms, while others watched and commented upon video-taped segments from classrooms.

The academic partner also engaged in periods of modeling with groups of children. During these times, participant teachers were able to observe the interaction between the children and the academic partner with opportunity for subsequent discussion. Figure 1 presents an example of one of these sessions.

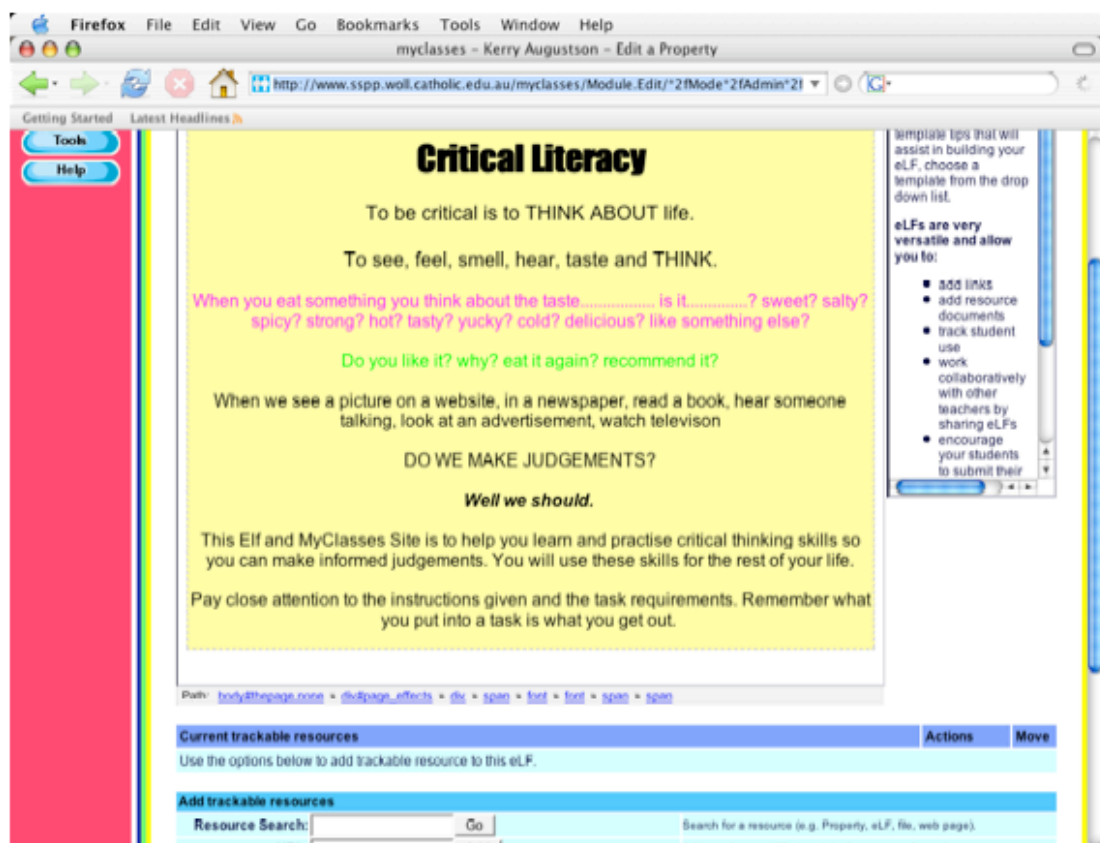


**Figure 1:** Modelling critical literacy session with children as teachers observe

### *Time for dialogue*

One of the most commented upon components of the professional development experiences from the participant teachers was the opportunity to have time to talk with their colleagues about the teaching of critical literacy.

During the workshop sessions, the participant teachers were encouraged to share work samples generated from their classrooms. Figure 2 presents a screen capture taken from a class website one teacher developed. On this site a collection of tasks for the students to engage with were presented, all with a critical literacy focus.



**Figure 2:** Critical Literacy focus on class website (used with permission from Kerrie Augustson)

### *Time to reflect*

The scheduling of the workshops provided for time between sessions for the participants to reflect upon new knowledge they had gained, new classroom practices they had experimented with and how they could incorporate this in future practice. After each workshop participants were asked to identify the new knowledge they had gained, areas they wanted to explore further and professional goals they had set for themselves. This more formal reflection passed some accountability to each of the teachers as they documented their learning which also worked to inform the direction of the project.

### *Time to teach*

The pre-session tasks consistently involved the participant teachers in implementing and evaluating some aspect of critical literacy within their classrooms. Each of the teachers responded to this differently. As an example, one participant explained how they *“Chose a task which I was personally confident with and then modeled this with the class and then gave them an opportunity to use / work with the knowledge / skills etc collaboratively.”* Another participant described, *“the ideas improved my confidence and allowed me to grow professionally. This then led to improved student enthusiasm and engagement.”* A different participant expressed how interested his students became in subsequent classroom experiences, *“I feel that because I became so engrossed the children became engaged.”*

The opportunity to incorporate different strategies within regular classroom practice also appeared to provide participants with opportunity to practice and refine their teaching. Figure 3 provides an example of how after the visual literacy workshop, a participant staged a photograph and then provided questions for the students to consider in their analysis of this. One participant described her endeavours to incorporate open-ended questioning to critically explore a text, *“The response from the children showed me that my questioning was not explicit enough for the task. The second time the children responded better and we gathered a lot from the text.”*

## FOCUS TWO

*What is in the background or surrounds of a view is also just as important as the focus.*

*Be critical, look and think.*

The photo below still has the same focus, but props have been added.

What has been added?  
Why have they been chosen?  
What do they say about the product?  
Do they make the view better?  
Will they sell the product?



**Figure 3:** Classroom implementation of idea from workshop (used with permission from Kerrie Auguston)

### Professional relationships

Relationships were central to the professional culture within the school, and the interaction of participants and researchers throughout the project. Open communication between all who were involved with the project was essential. Frequent opportunities were provided for participants to comment upon and evaluate the workshops and the direction of the project. Such openness, we believe, allowed for a sense of connectedness to develop amongst the participants, creating in turn a learning community and professional support network.

### **Concluding Comments**

The project we have reported on provides example of how powerful professional development experiences can be when they are connected to an identified need. In the project we have presented, this need was one that was initially identified by the



school. This need was connected to a strong evidence base; there was significant data to prove that a focus on critical literacy was necessary. What is just as important though, is that the teachers themselves also acknowledged their professional need to learn more about critical literacy to better support their students. The problem, owned by the school and the teachers, was therefore a meaningful and appropriate focus for continued professional development.

The prolonged timeframe of this professional development project was a positive and important element to the experiences. Maintaining a consistent focus over a two year project demonstrated the school's commitment to support the initiative. Further, the provision of funding to provide time, in each of the identified types, prioritized the project within the school community and sent the message to the teachers that the time they spent engaging with critical literacy was important and valued.

Relationships proved crucial in supporting the teachers throughout the project and in encouraging the shift in thinking that occurred for each participant teacher. The existing relationship between second named researcher as the school-based project leader and the first named researcher as academic partner and workshop facilitator, meant that professional respect, openness and trust were already established and they could work together to support each of the participant teachers. The location of the project within the school site was empowering for the teachers; it was their territory, their colleagues, their students, their problem, and workshop focuses and associated content were in response to these.

While the school committed to funding the project for a two-year period, the actual content and organisation of the workshops were not set from the beginning. Planning for the next workshop in light of our reflections on the previous sessions, coupled with evaluations collected from the teachers, enabled each workshop to be responsive to the teachers' needs and for the project to build upon existing knowledge as pathways into new understandings were created. The teachers were aware of our regular planning meetings and spent time providing detailed feedback, feeling they had a say in the direction of the project.

This project empowered the participant teachers. It provided avenue to bring current theory to life in their classrooms. Their increased familiarity with theoretical perspectives and ways to actualize this in their classroom contexts provided each teacher with a metalanguage to describe critical literacy in connection with their classroom practice. The professional development focus was not a quick fix to a complex professional problem; the project was continually contextualised within the bigger picture, but deconstructed within the in-school context.

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