Improving teachers' professional learning: The quality learning circle approach

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ABSTRACT *A group of teachers at an urban primary school who wanted more from their appraisal experiences decided to explore alternatives during 2003. After engaging in professional reading, they noted potential in and decided to trial an approach known as the quality learning circle (QLC) (Stewart & Prebble, 1993). This article is an account of the learning journeys the teachers took to improve the quality of their professional learning using the QLC model. The teachers adopted a reflective practice approach (Smyth, 1989) to enable them to describe their practice, explore meanings, consider how these had developed and explore alternatives. Data, drawn from the minutes of meetings and interviews with the teachers, provide details of the processes and decisions required to establish a QLC.*

INTRODUCTION

Finding ways to create and maintain a "learning" teaching profession is a considerable challenge for teachers, school administrators and politicians (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999). Professional development programmes world-wide continue to face criticism because they lack not only the flexibility needed to satisfy the needs of all teachers, but also acknowledgement of the budgetary, time, energy and personnel constraints that prevent them from being successfully implemented and utilised within schools (Hargreaves & Evans, 1997; Lovett, 2002a).

In response to pressures calling for proof of the quality of teaching and learning in New Zealand schools, the Ministry of Education mandated specific minimum standards for teachers' work. These measures include national guidelines for performance management (Ministry of Education, 1996) and professional standards for all teachers (Ministry of Education, 1999). Commentators have criticised these standards on several grounds. Codd (1999), for example, argues that, in making all work visible through reporting systems and managerial procedures, educational accountability has been reduced to a form of managerial control rather than a means of improving teaching practices. Similarly O'Neill (1997) suggests "for the vast majority of teachers in schools PMS is unnecessary and insulting" (p.121). The Ministry of Education (1998) contends that performance management systems provide the structures to support teachers' work and ensure its quality. However, it is the schools that must determine how the summative and formative functions of teacher appraisal can be met to satisfy systemic and individual needs. Appraisal plays a key role in determining future directions for teachers' learning particularly when viewed as an opportunity for reflective practice with an interested colleague (Lovett, 1998; Stewart, 1997).

In this article, we document the experiences of six teachers working with an alternative model of appraisal known as the Quality Learning Circle (QLC). While teachers may experience a range of possible appraisal models (e.g., self, individual, peer, group), the focus of this article is the QLC.

THE QUALITY LEARNING CIRCLE MODEL

The QLC model of appraisal enables teachers to work collaboratively to improve their practice by viewing themselves as "active constructors of their own knowledge about learning and teaching" (Nolan & Francis, 1992, p. 50). The model's primary emphasis is on teacher learning, and it allows documentation to be gathered to show that learning has occurred.

Several key features make the model learner-focused. First and foremost, the QLC is a collegial approach in which small groups of teachers join together to develop their professional practice and provide support for one another in their learning. Regular meetings are held for teachers to discuss a selected theme (topic) and what it means for their classroom teaching. This is typically followed by an opportunity to observe other members of the QLC demonstrate their interpretation of the theme in their teaching. The group then reconvenes for further discussion and reflection in order to construct new meanings about classroom practices.

This group approach to learning is favoured by O'Neill (1997), who suggests that structures that "make it possible for teachers to articulate, analyse, understand and develop their own classroom practice with colleagues who share similar concerns and experiences" (p.116) have considerable potential for improving the quality of teaching. The absence of opportunities for sustained and meaningful teacher learning is now receiving considerable attention in the educational leadership literature (Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000; Hopkins, 2001; Lovett, 2002a; Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003). Stoll et al. (2003) acknowledge this emphasis in the title of their latest book, *It's About Learning (And It's About Time): What's In It for Schools?* They argue that teacher learning needs to be given greater emphasis and suggest that "in a fast-changing world, if you can't learn, unlearn and relearn, you're lost" (p. *xv*). Thus, schools need to view themselves as learning organisations where the learning of their participants is of prime importance. Furthermore, Hopkins (2001) purports that student learning will not be accelerated at the levels most governments desire unless schools are redesigned around learning. This means emphasising learning for all participants of the schoolhouse—students, teachers and principals—rather than merely tightening controls.

THE STUDY

The QLC that is the focus of this study was initiated by the deputy principal (DP) of a U5 school in a provincial centre in the South Island. He and several other teachers felt dissatisfied with the school's appraisal system and decided it was time for action. They considered that a "tick in the box" compliance approach was not contributing to their professional learning and development and that an appraisal system ought

to benefit both the school and the individuals concerned. The DP was well placed to initiate change through his role as the school's appraisal manager. Deciding that the QLC showed considerable potential for teachers to explore themes of immediate relevance and application to classroom settings, he discussed the matter with the school's principal, who agreed to trial it across the 2003 school year. The idea was described to the whole staff and five teachers joined the DP to form a QLC.

Participants

The six members of the QLC comprised three men and three women, who, between them, had been teaching eight to 24 years and represented all the teaching levels in the school—that is, Years 1 to 8. The school also contracted a mentor to work with the QLC group.

Procedure

The mentor's role was to share information about the QLC approach so that the group could make their own decisions about how they might implement the model and develop a shared focus. The mentor also acted as a researcher who kept notes of the QLC meetings and interviewed each of the participants after each phase. Each participant received written details of the project explaining the research process and an assurance that they could check the data for accuracy and remain anonymous in the presentation of that data.

Multiple approaches to data collection were used for this study. These included document analysis of minutes from meetings and school policies and of interview transcripts from each of the teachers. Interviews were conducted after the first two rounds of visits that the QLC members made to one another's classrooms. These were followed by observational notes for the group meeting, which constituted round three. The patterns and observations obtained from these data are reported and discussed in three sections that together provide a three-phased picture of how the QLC operated and developed across three school terms and what the teachers learned during each phase. It should be noted that the QLC continued beyond this point, with a further round of classroom visits that are not featured in this article.

Phase One: Setting up the Model

The purpose of the QLC's first meeting was to introduce the model to the teachers, and then for the teachers to establish and agree on guiding principles and organisational details. Particular points of discussion centred around the sharing of QLC-related experiences, the experimental nature of the process, safety to make mistakes, and making meaning from these experiences to inform future teaching and learning practices.

The mentor supplied each member of the QLC with a personal copy of Stewart and Prebble's (1993) book, which provided details of the QLC working in a school setting. The group decided to follow Stewart and Prebble's suggested theme of classroom routines as being particularly suitable for the beginning of the school

year. The teachers agreed that this theme allowed considerable scope for each of the teachers to choose a major and minor theme for the first round of classroom visits.

The rest of the meeting involved establishing a timetable for the remaining weeks of the term so that the teachers could plan times to prepare for the first round of the visits. This included selecting partners for the classroom visits, clarifying the learning themes for each pair, deciding which lessons would be observed, and timetabling follow-up meetings to discuss the lessons. Before the next meeting, the deputy principal and the mentor discussed some suggestions for developing classroom observation skills. Notes, accompanied by some questions for discussion, were circulated to the QLC. These materials raised issues such as the extent to which the chosen themes might need to link with the professional standards and performance indicators in the teachers' performance agreements. Also listed was the need to clarify accountability functions and decide what elements of the school's regular appraisal process would still be expected. The mentor supplied the deputy principal with examples of how data could be recorded. He distributed these to the QLC members, who then developed from these ideas a recording sheet that they could all use. Draft forms for recording observations and giving feedback were also supplied.

At the second meeting, who would partner whom and what would be recorded on the observation sheets were confirmed. The participants agreed that the front page of the observation form would be the only sheet shown to the principal. This would include details of the theme, the corresponding professional standards dimension and the major and minor areas of focus for the observation. The remaining details of what was observed and learnt from the observation would remain the property of the teachers. In this way, the group hoped to achieve confidentiality in the process while retaining a level of accountability to the principal.

After the first round of classroom visits and the follow-up discussion meetings, the mentor/researcher interviewed the six teachers. These interviews were taped to allow accurate written transcripts to be made.

Findings

The teachers welcomed what the QLC model had to offer them, particularly its thoroughness and potential to make a difference to their teaching practices. The contrast of the QLC with previous appraisal experiences was noticeable in the following comment:

> *It's the chance of actually getting to the bottom of some of my professional practice. You know, in the past, appraisal has been very much the once over lightly . . . even with the best of intentions, it's always seemed to come back to just ticking boxes . . . fulfilling that accountability dimension . . . I've left . . . feeling a little frustrated that we didn't dig deeper into what makes me tick in the classroom and how my work goes.* (Teacher A)

Lack of interest in teachers' individual goals was an issue for Teachers B, E and F, who suggested that once personal goals had been set, no further links were made to the school's appraisal system. Teacher E, for example, reported feeling particularly

demeaned by her appraiser, year after year, simply ticking a box to say her classroom planning had been completed, or that she had provided evidence of planning for differing abilities or, worse still, that she had furnished a timetable and attendance register.

The teachers claimed that the QLC model overcame the learning shortcoming of the traditional appraisal model by offering them the potential to take charge of their learning agendas and to make real progress on aspects of their teaching that would improve their sense of self-worth and achievement. Teacher D noted:

At this time in my career . . . I want to keep growing. Hopefully, I have [already] shown my performance is adequate or suitable, meets a certain standard, so really I need to motivate myself or have others to help motivate me to work on new challenges and be exposed to new ideas.

Opportunities to see others teach were valued by all of the teachers. Teacher B said, "I can always find something that I can take from someone . . . I always think, well it's reminded me of something or I will change to do something differently." Teacher C considered that there was no such thing as a perfect teacher and welcomed the QLC as a learning opportunity.

Each of the QLC pairs chose their own areas of focus. These included:

- teacher movements around the classroom
- patterns of interaction with learners (girls versus boys)
- ways used to gain children's attention
- the appropriateness of a teacher's language for the age group of the children
- the balance between teacher conversations about children's behaviour versus the nature of the task
- management of the timetable.

Without exception, the teachers noted the challenge of being an observer in the classroom. This was despite paying careful attention to specifying a major and minor focus. For example, Teacher C commented:

I had to get out of the mindset of looking at other things and trying to pinpoint it down to just what I was supposed to be looking at . . . I found myself writing down notes on things I shouldn't have been and crossed them out. Trying hard to focus on that was actually pretty tricky.

Teacher A asked his partner to "mirror" his professional practice back to him. He wanted to know what he did and for his partner to describe what he saw happening in the lesson. In another pair, Teacher B, accustomed to observing colleagues, brought a questioning approach to her feedback. Her partner appreciated this questioning, particularly that which required him to think about some of his practices, which included why he had asked one particular child and not the other children numerous questions. Teachers E and F were happy with their focus and method of recording, but acknowledged that they could not do justice to two themes at once. These teachers reported the value of having their partner observe their practice and talk about it with them. Teacher A had been made to think about his coverage of the ability levels in the class when his partner had noticed him

sitting down beside both the most and least able learners but standing over the middle-ability children.

For Teacher B, feedback on the areas of focus indicated that her own concerns were misplaced and that she was, in fact, moving around the class in an effective manner to keep children on task. Discussion using the map of the classroom had provided a precise tracking of movements during the lesson. Teachers B and D noted, in particular, the benefits of using a data-gathering tool to promote discussion.

Teacher F acted upon the feedback given to her in a different way again. She used this information with her class of very young children to form the basis of a session on the reasons for class rules and routines. She also explained to the class that the observer had come to find out whether the children in the class were good listeners, whether they put their hands up or called out, and what the observer thought about these behaviours.

These accounts of the QLC teachers' experiences during the first round of the QLC indicate that the teachers' learning depended on establishing a trusting relationship with their respective partners. It also relied on choosing foci that would readily allow them to obtain data suitable for informing their classroom teaching practices and facilitating the discussion of strategies for further improvements.

Phase Two: The Numeracy Circle

At the start of Term 2 the QLC members selected a shared focus on numeracy, new partner combinations and made a timetable for the classroom observations. Two of the participating teachers had worked with the Ministry of Education's numeracy project the year before, and the remaining teachers were either trying to make sense of it or were awaiting their turn to work with it. This time the observation themes were more substantive and the teachers partnered across all levels. They included:

- on-task behaviours for the unsupervised groups
- adherence to the new numeracy lesson format and the structure of the lesson
- the methods each teacher used to keep down the noise levels of unsupervised children during the lesson
- use of teaching resources in the lesson.

The mentor/researcher interviewed five of the teachers after the second round of classroom visits. The sixth teacher could not be interviewed because of a prior commitment to a local musical festival. The questions asked explored the processes used by each new pair to set up the visits, what they gained from the feedback session, and their perceptions of the QLC model for their personal development.

Findings

The group focus of numeracy provided an opportunity for the teachers to share their strengths and review their teaching of numeracy according to the new programme. It provided a focus that, as Teacher B said, could benefit all of the teachers, not just those who admitted to feeling frustrated about the new programme. Teacher A

said the numeracy project was something they were talking about and so wanted to share knowledge and information on it. The focus also fitted into the professional knowledge dimension of the Ministry of Education's aforementioned professional standards. Two-way learning was possible because the experienced teachers had to model and justify their practices to their partners while the remaining teachers could observe first-hand how equipment was used in the lessons and the specific time allocations for warm-ups, group work and lesson conclusions.

Teachers A and E had to take particular care in setting up their observations because of the five-level teaching difference between them. Teacher A asked his partner to take an especially close look at his maths lesson in terms of how it matched up with the numeracy development programme. He asked his partner to comment on how he might change his delivery, particularly the methods and procedures that he used and, to a lesser extent, the content.

Teacher F was at first a little uncertain about the value of having her new partner observe her teaching because they had already spent much time talking about the numeracy programme. However, she admitted that the observation had worked out well because, at the time it was carried out, she was regrouping the children and wanted to know how well the children were settling into the routines, especially when working away from her.

New ideas for teaching maths lessons formed the learning agenda for Teacher C. Having received limited direction and guidance on the numeracy development programme, he thought his colleagues, who had already received the training, might be helpful. His partner (Teacher D) had already completed the numeracy training and made a number of changes to the delivery and use of resources in the maths lesson. While feeling somewhat daunted by the number of games his partner had developed, Teacher C could see that the effort had been worthwhile.

By this stage of the QLC experience, the teachers had viewed a range of data-gathering tools. While the teachers had used classroom maps in the first QLC visits, several of the pairs chose to use interval sampling for the second set of visits, and they developed their own codes for this. Teachers C and D found this exercise particularly valuable for finding out which children had been distracted, were off-task or whose talk was not maths related. Talk for this pair had begun with a detailed sharing of their planning before the lesson. This talk had energised them both before and after the lessons.

Teachers B and F, preferring not to use tally sheets during their observations, kept detailed anecdotal notes. They had given each other permission to record anything of interest and felt satisfied that this method had been useful. Teacher F had worried that her observation of her partner might have involved a problem-solving exercise along the lines of "I don't know what I am doing. Can you tell me how to fix it?" She was relieved to find that the process had been more of a "stock-take", in that it had allowed her to describe her partner's current developmental stage and suggest what the next steps might be.

Teacher A had also expressed an interest in having his partner focus during the observation on the on-task behaviour of the children when working away from the teacher. He explained:

In the middle chunk of my maths period . . . the children work in ability groups, and I have a little bit of an issue sometimes with the amount of noise and activity and bustle from those groups. But I do question whether I am reading them right, and sometimes if I turn around and say, "Hey, keep the noise down over there," I am thinking was the noise an important part of what they were doing? Was it off-task noise or were they actually talking about the task in hand?

Feedback from a colleague on this very issue was important for Teacher A, who, in the previous round, had learned that on one occasion his interruption of a group had led them to move off-task. Feedback on the timing of the various components of the lesson had also alerted him to the need to keep five minutes for consolidating the day's learning. He was also heartened to discover that Teacher E found it a challenge to make time for the lesson conclusion amidst the need to tidy up the equipment.

The opportunity to talk was the most useful aspect of the QLC for Teachers A and E. Teacher A said:

The (QLC) kicked us into another level of conversation…. Our conversation about the particular focus of the observation was structured yet we also unloaded other things and felt better for this.

Regular discussions of what the QLC meant for the participants allowed the model to be shaped by its members. The value of the QLC was apparent when Teachers C and D wanted their next focus to be even more challenging.

Phase Three: Sharing Philosophies of Teaching

For the third phase, the teachers were uncertain whether they needed to include classroom observations. What seemed more important was that their agreed topic was one that would provide ample opportunities for focused talk and reflections on their practice. After exploring a range of possibilities for a focus, the group agreed to a sharing of their philosophies of teaching in an off-site workshop using three questions: how do we teach? Why do we teach? How do we build rapport with the learner? As before, the school arranged for relieving teachers to work in the classrooms of the QLC teachers so that the workshop could be held during the school day. The workshop featured 20-minute presentations from each of the QLC teachers. Teacher C was unable to attend because of sickness. Permission was granted for the mentor/researcher to take notes during the workshop.

Findings

The presentations from the five teachers were particularly stimulating and thought provoking. Each was refreshingly unique in style but somewhat surprisingly addressed some common themes. These centred on the teacher's role in making decisions regarding the what, how and why of learning, systemic controls and children's engagement and ownership in their own learning agendas. References were made to Vygotsky, Glasser and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This information was imaginatively presented through personal narratives, statements on card from theorists, and matching of personal teaching examples with the theorists.

The open and frank dialogue occurring during each seminar marked a new phase in the QLC's development. In accepting the challenge of sharing their personal values and beliefs about teaching with one another, the teachers had not only made their views public but open to closer scrutiny. This showed a willingness to learn and take risks. The private world of philosophies of teaching, previously recorded primarily for job applications, had now become public knowledge. This, in itself, was an admission that these teachers valued and needed each other's contributions to further their professional learning and development. Personal dilemmas became topics for all the teachers in his or her seminar, as similar themes began to emerge throughout the morning. All the teachers were concerned about their ability to meet children's individual needs within the constraints of schooling. Once their working relationship had become one of trusting of one another, they were able to consider new directions that, in turn, saw the QLC realising deeper levels of sharing and sense making. Each member was an active learner who also shared personal insights back to the group. There was no hierarchy of learners.

CONCLUSION

Little's (1999) belief that a school's values, norms and relationships must be aligned with learning was evident in the ways the QLC teachers chose to work with one another. Focused dialogue about what happens in classrooms and the opportunity to spend time in one another's classrooms contributed to their learning and satisfaction in the job. That such practices are restricted to teachers in their first year of teaching is unfortunate because, as the teachers in this study show, all teachers, regardless of their levels of experience, can benefit. This is because teachers spend most of their working day in separate rooms and are therefore denied opportunities for learning alongside other adults who could support their reflections in and on practice. Huberman (1993) acknowledges this problem by referring to teacher learning as being a "lone wolf" activity and suggests that teachers have to rely on their own resources to improve their practices.

The QLC experience shows that teachers can make useful learning gains when their schools value collaborative ways of working and provide the necessary time and resources for teachers' learning to occur. As these opportunities become more frequent, collaboration then becomes a preferred way of operating. Little (1999) describes these collaborative ways of working as those which show "respect and encouragement, support for help seeking and help giving, celebration of struggle and accomplishment, principles and well-informed debate, and open consideration of alternative views" (p. 254). These same features are replicated in the QLC experience and indicate the strength of learning gains for individuals and groups of teachers that are not possible in the usual appraisal situation where learning is centred on individuals and is primarily for compliance and accountability.

In attempting to counteract the isolation of teaching, Little (1999) proposes that schools can and should integrate teacher development more fully into the ongoing work of teachers. She suggests organising teacher learning around teachers' work with students can do this. Certainly, this was what appealed to the QLC teachers

when they selected a group focus for study each term, and it was, in turn, this focused study of teaching and learning accompanied by support from other colleagues to investigate questions, problems and issues arising from teaching that furthered their professional learning.

Emphasis on workplace conditions for learning, and particularly relationships amongst colleagues, has been gaining favour in the educational leadership literature (Fullan, 1999; Hargreaves, 1998; Leithwood, Leonard & Sharratt, 1998). Schools have been facing increasing criticism for their failure to capitalise on the strengths of people, to forge collaborative relationships and to build real senses of·community amongst them (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). When this argument is transferred to teacher appraisal, it draws attention to processes that allow compliance and school-wide needs to dominate at the expense of meeting the specific needs of individual teachers. What is now needed is attention to both aspects (tasks and people). It cannot be assumed that schools will engage in collaborative practices without more deliberate and structured opportunities to show teachers the benefit of working more closely with their colleagues. Rather than leaving learning to chance encounters, the structuring of the QLC experience models the benefits of more collaborative approaches and thereby greatly increases teachers' job commitment and satisfaction.

This people element has also been emphasised by Arygris and Schon (1978), whose concepts of single and double loop learning show the gains to be made when learning involves contact with others who might question ideas or offer different perspectives that, in turn, might lead to further reflection on practice. Such focused talk about teaching practice including observations, resource sharing, planning and evaluation are key attributes of the QLC approach (Lovett, 2002b). Likewise, Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) argue that this is the direction schools must take if they are to successfully draw colleagues together to enhance learning opportunities.

Elmore and Burney (1999) similarly support this emphasis on capacity building from within schools. They suggest we know more about what good professional development looks like than about how to organise it. Their organising principles for mobilising people for instructional improvement are again replicated in the QLC approach. These include an exclusive focus on instruction, acceptance that change is a long and multi-stage process, shared expertise, ideas coming from people working together, clear expectations, and a culture that values collegiality, caring and respect. The QLC model differs from regular appraisal because it allows for sustained learning opportunities rather than one-off compliance activities. The teachers in the study who completed the three QLC cycles were energised by their continuing interactions about classroom learning. Observations of classroom practice had helped them to work with their colleagues in new ways, reaching deeper levels of meaning. This experience had also demonstrated to them that they could take more control of their professional learning by adopting a journey mindset that was learner focused yet still satisfied school-wide needs for compliance and accountability.

The future viability of the QLC model in this school was raised through discussion with the deputy principal. While being very positive about the QLC experience for himself and the five other teachers, he also admitted that this group had been hand-picked for success. The group could not continue with its same membership for

2004 because one member was leaving the school. The absence of this teacher would alter the way the QLC might continue, as it would either need to reduce in size and eliminate one pairing or invite another person to join its established group. Other teachers in the school were showing some interest in the QLC as an alternative to their standard appraisal, which raised the question about how a new group might be formed and supported for similar success. Several possibilities were mentioned. One was for the original group to continue as a group of four with the deputy principal starting another QLC. A second was for the original group to form several new groups amongst the staff. A third possibility was to make the QLC compulsory and therefore replace the standard model or to accept that the QLC was one option that would suit some teachers more than others.

Regardless of the decision for future use of the QLC model, this study strongly confirms Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin's (1999) claims that two areas of importance have surfaced from recent research findings in teacher professional development. These claims highlight the importance of teacher involvement in solving problems of practice and the need to address what is known about how teachers change their ideas about and approaches to practice. The QLC incorporates both areas within its organisational structure to ensure teachers can make choices about their learning, work with colleagues to question knowledge and practices and plan for improvements to their practice. While legislation demands performance management policies and structures at the school level to ensure a learning profession, this needs to be made a reality through more deliberate experimentation with approaches that foster teacher learning. The QLC has this potential provided that it is treated as an evolving experience that its participants create rather than have imposed on them.

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