School Improvement Episode 12: Evidence-based professional learning

AUDIO

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Jo Earp: For the last three years school leaders and staff at Jordan River Learning Federation Senior School have been focusing on evidence-based teaching and reflection. It’s included the development of a professional learning approach called CCRP – that’s Connect, Collect, Reflect and Progress. Assistant Principal Murray Cronin joined me on the line from Tasmania to talk about the evidence base for the model and what each of the four stages involves.

JE: Murray Cronin, thanks for joining Teacher magazine. Now, firstly a bit of context – can you give listeners an overview of the school?

Murray Cronin: Yeah, definitely. The school’s name is Jordan River Learning Federation Senior School and it’s a Grade 7-12 government facility. It has about 350 students, approximately 30 teaching and even more non-teaching [staff]. It’s a member of the Jordan River Learning Federation, which recognises our relationship with the neighbouring primary schools (there are three), and this model kind of recognises the need for meaningful collaboration between primary and secondary schools.

The senior school is relatively unique in Tasmania. It occupies a large geographic and administrative footprint, it incorporates Learning Services South (which is the south of Tasmania), the largest school farm, which is located a short drive away, and we also have direct oversight over a Trade Training Centre, which provides really first class training facilities for vocational education and training (VET) for our students and the broader community. The school is able to facilitate learning across the
Australian Curriculum and also provide personalised learning pathways for TAS Certification and VET programs.

The staff are equally as diverse. We have beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teachers who have taught in primary, secondary and tertiary contexts. We have teachers who have taught interstate and abroad, and there’s of course a range of specialisations that are a common feature of secondary contexts.

The common thread I suppose is our staff’s personal and collective desire to improve, not just themselves, but the students that we have here. So, one of our goals as a school is to ensure that we have processes here to support teaching, learning and the leadership aspirations of our staff.

JE: For the last three years there, the leadership team and the staff have been focusing on evidence-based teaching and reflection and, as part of that, you’ve developed an approach to professional learning called the CCRP model?

MC: Yes, CCRP is an acronym for Connect, Collect, Reflect, Progress. It really hinges off something that we developed a few years ago, a Quality Teaching Framework. Our Quality Teaching Framework identifies and describes high impact teaching practices and the CCRP model supports capacity building around these practices.

The QTF (Quality Teaching Framework), we went about the development of that collaboratively. We synthesised a range of research – we looked at [John] Hattie, [Robert] Marzano, [Dylan] Wiliam, [Charlotte] Danielson and some frameworks from other states such as the New South Wales Quality Teaching Framework (http://www.theelements.education.nsw.gov.au/the-elements-manual/policy-reforms-and-focus-areas/quality-teaching-framework), and we developed a five point scale. Teachers were asked ‘what practices and strategies do you think significantly support student achievement at our school?’ So, by engaging with our staff in the development of the framework we were really able to stamp our school’s values, their prior learnings and experiences, into this improvement narrative.

The CCRP model wouldn’t be possible if we also didn’t describe some of the things in our teaching framework. There are seven practices: Articulate learning intentions and why the learning is important; Provide clear messages about what successful learning looks like; Provide explicit instruction; Use appropriate resources and technologies to support learning; Check for understanding; Provide students with feedback on how they can improve; and, Use schoolwide positive behaviour support practices.
We anchored all these practices against AITSL Standards. We used the Classroom Practice Continuum (https://www.aitsl.edu.au/lead-develop/develop-others/classroom-observation/classroom-practice) to do this. In doing so, the standards really support staff to describe what teaching practices look like at various levels of proficiency, which then serves as a blueprint to not only inform but initiate some of the professional learning needs that we’ve identified.

The CCRP model really builds on this and was borne out of the school collaboratively looking at different observation models with staff. It’s our evidence-based professional learning process that supports professional development in our school.

Connect – That’s teachers connecting with the school’s Quality Teaching Framework and an observer. This is really the first part of the process and one of the protocols that we have. So, in this meeting, the observer will support the teacher to identify one of the evidence-based practices from the framework that they would like to improve. In doing this the teachers really have a significant amount of control over their professional learning in the school. They also come to an agreement on things like what sort of data could be collected for the teacher by the observer, when would be an appropriate time and what sort of duration they would need the observer in the classroom for.

JE: And so, the second element, as you mentioned is Collect, and that’s the observer collecting data during an observation. We’ll move onto that in a second, but who would the observer be, generally?

MC: At the moment, we have myself as one of the primary observers. We also have had some other staff doing observations, but our vision into the future is about supporting the professional learning around this stage, which currently the scope is very broad. Our vision is to have a team of observers within the school. ...

The second part of the process is Collect – this is when the observer collects objective data during the observation about the extent to which that practice supports student learning. When I say ‘objective data’ it could be the observer watching what the teacher is doing and recording what was agreed upon, it could be them interacting with students and recording data that was agreed upon. So, it can be quite varied what the observer collects, but the most important part of this process is that the teacher knows what the observer is in there doing.

The third part of the process is Reflect. This results from the observer giving the data to the teacher and they reflect on it, as well as the AITSL Standards, and identify some developmental goals. So, we’ve described these goals as either ‘tweaks’ (some
people know that as a first order change), something that they can do without any professional learning interventions, or ‘shifts’, which may be something that takes time and requires some professional learning intervention.

All of this information is documented in a professional observation journal and the information is also recorded in a spreadsheet – we’ve called it a Teacher Tracking Tool. And this is very much what the fourth part of the process is, this idea of Progress. The observer will monitor the teacher’s progress against these goals, so they’ll follow up with them on a regular basis, and if a certain goal isn’t being achieved in the time that the teacher thought that’s when we can then talk about ‘what sort of professional learning might support you to achieve this?’. So, we’re able to be strategic with how we allocate resources, for example, or what sort of strategies might have an impact on this teacher. It really supports us to evaluate the overall impact of what we’re doing to support teacher development. …

One of the most common things we’ve probably seen the greatest impact from is leveraging teacher’s capacity. Because we are gathering this data on teacher learning, we are able to identify strengths within our school and we can leverage this by allowing teachers to then go and observe these teachers and the specific things that they are exemplar at – so, that’s been a really powerful professional learning intervention within the school.

JE: You mentioned in the beginning there that you’ve drawn on a range of research and a few tools – you mentioned the AITSL Standards there as well, linking it back to there. I understand it’s also linked into the National School Improvement Tool? (https://www.acer.org/school-improvement/improvement-tool)

MC: It is. The National School Improvement Tool was very much the document that we used to support the development of our vision. For example, in Domain 3 – this idea of a culture that promotes learning and the idea of shared commitment to improving teachers, and the notion that teachers would invite leaders to observe them in their classroom. That was one of our visions.

Domain 5 – the idea of teachers in the school sharing and showcasing best practice to support professional learning of others, and this idea of a self-reflective culture, focus on improving classroom teaching, that was … this really informed our vision. And, of course, Domain 8 – the use of effective pedagogical practices, this idea of identifying, understanding and implementing evidence-based teaching.

I suppose the National School Improvement Tool really became our success criteria
– this is what we would like to achieve – and every step of the way we’ve really used lots of [research] to inform how we’ve gone about things. …

The CCRP model was really borne out of exploring different observation models and AITSL’s Classroom Practice interactive (https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/looking-at-classroom-practice) was particularly helpful with this process. We were able to expose [our teachers] to different observation models, the purposes behind them, and we were able to gauge (through feedback) the preferred methods that teachers here had. And, that was, they really liked the peer observation model, videoing of practice, as opposed to models where things are a bit more evaluative and subjective. It also really helped us with the development of observation protocols.

AITSL’s Charter for Professional Learning (https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/australian-charter-for-the-professional-learning-of-teachers-and-school-leaders) – that really helped us to understand what kind of professional learning processes are most likely to result in changes in practice. Again, this Charter became a success criteria for what we wanted in our school. This idea of learning in context, learning being relevant, collaborative and future-focused.

The vision of having the ownership of this process distributed, that was borne out of a range of different authors that articulate different leadership practices, different leadership styles, and the impact of broad versus targeted scope. For example, Stephen Dinham’s work has been really informative there.

And the Progress stage was very much informed by Guskey’s Five Levels (http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar02/vol59/num06/Does-It-Make-a-Difference%C2%A2-Evaluating-Professional-Development.aspx) of data. We wanted to, at every stage, monitor and evaluate the impact of what we were doing and be able to clearly articulate to anyone how we evaluate our professional learning in our school. So, yes, we have student learning data to help us do that but we also have teacher practice data, student practice data, which I can talk about a bit later …

JE: You mentioned earlier about staff expertise and it’s shone a light on that, if you like. Obviously that’s a theme that runs throughout the National School Improvement Tool as well. So, that’s one of the impacts on staff and the benefits of it. What about some of the other impacts on staff and students of course, student outcomes?

MC: Definitely, I mentioned before the use of Guskey’s Five Levels to help us evaluate
what’s been happening at various stages. We have a lot of Level 1/Level 2 data that tells us that teachers are positive, and that’s through their reactions and reflections that we’ve gathered. …

The Teacher Tracking Tool (the collection of teacher learning goals) helps us to see the impact of various strategies on teacher learning. We have data that tells us about the knowledge and skills that teachers are acquiring and this data also tells us what strategies are effective, what professional learning interventions are effective. …

We also have Level 5 data – this idea of student outcomes. So, we are seeing growth in student outcomes and recently we had a review where students were asked to talk about the learning that’s happening in classrooms. The language they used mirrored the Quality Teaching Framework. So, this idea that students were able to articulate that in lessons there’s differentiation, they use success criteria to assess their work or the work of others, that they receive feedback, that teachers are constantly checking their understanding. We have a range of different things that really help us to understand what impact this is all having.

That’s all for this episode – to keep listening or to download all of our podcasts for free visit acer.ac/teacheritunes (http://acer.ac/teacheritunes) or you can head to www.soundcloud.com/teacher-ACER (http://www.soundcloud.com/teacher-ACER). You can also check out the full transcript of this podcast, which includes links to some of the resources mentioned by Murray Cronin – just head to www.teachermagazine.com.au (http://www.teachermagazine.com.au). And, that’s also where you can access the latest articles, videos and infographics for free.

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Make a list of five teaching and learning practices and strategies that you think significantly support student achievement at your school. Invite a colleague to do the same and discuss your responses – is there common ground? If there are differences, how would you justify your selections?

Thinking about your own classroom practice: what are your individual progress goals for the year? What additional professional learning support would help you meet those goals?

Observation is a big part of the CCRP model developed by this school. What
observation model is used in your school? As a school leader, is this the preferred model among staff?