Professional Learning Communities for Comprehension Improvement

At its core, the Professional Learning Community has a commitment to improved student learning. In the Northern Adelaide region, improved comprehension is the focus. In the PLC, staff members work systematically and interdependently to impact their classroom practice in ways that lead to improved outcomes. Systematic processes engage each member of the PLC in a cycle of:

- Determining standards
- Improvement planning
- Intervention and support
- Performance reporting
- Self review

The model (see Fig 2) expands upon this cycle within the context of DIAf

How is improvement measured?

The Northern Adelaide Regional Improvement Plan states that there will be a 6% improvement in reading, writing, grammar and spelling scores, as measured by the NAPLaN, by 2012. This equates to a 2% improvement annually. At a site level, targets that are measurable over shorter time frames drive the work of the PLC’s. In the Professional Learning Community, members determine the achievement goals based on evidence of student learning. Comprehension outcomes can be measured in a range of ways e.g.

- standardised assessment tools e.g. TORCH (Test of Reading Comprehension) TROLL (Teacher Rating of Oral Language Learning) or PROBE (Prose, Reading Observation, Behaviour & Evaluation) [http://shop.acer.edu.au/acer-shop/],
- development of common formative assessments pre and post intervention
- collaborative development of assessment rubrics. See the websites for examples - [http://www.readinglady.com/mosaic/tools/Strategy%20Rubrics.pdf]

What comprehension strategies are effective?

Comprehension strategy instruction helps students become purposeful, active readers who are in control of their own reading comprehension. The cumulative result of nearly 3 decades of research “provides substantial evidence that explicit comprehension instruction improves students’ understanding of text ...and had positive effects on student’s general comprehension.” Harvey & Goudvis, Strategies that Work, p23. According to Harvey & Goudvis effective comprehension instruction is most effective when teachers teach with the end in mind (determine the purpose and intended outcomes prior to instruction), view strategies as a means to an end (strategies are taught with the view that students build a flexible repertoire), provide opportunities for modelled, guided and independent practice (gradual release of responsibility) and use student evidence to assess past instruction, guide future instruction and evaluate student performance.

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Figure 1: Comparison summary of recommended strategies
How do PLC’s work?

Essentially, Professional Learning Communities begin with a group of educators who are committed to building shared understandings and trialing initiatives in classrooms. PLC’s work well when they are linked to job-embedded professional learning. PLC’s respond to agreed site improvement priorities and need to be continually engaged and influencing the broader improvement processes of the site. Professional Learning Communities exist for the purpose of improving student learning outcomes. Within the PLC, the most effective goals are designed to achieve short term gains within the bigger context of the site improvement plan.

In the Northern Adelaide region, professional learning options aimed at improving leaders’ and teachers’ knowledge of comprehension include:

- Principals as Literacy Leaders - PALLS
- Site and cluster workshops based on the texts “Strategies that Work” and “Do I Really Have to Teach Reading?”
- Talking Literacy workshops for early years educators, presented by DECS Speech Pathologists
- Play and Literacy early years professional learning – Uni-SA accredited course
- Spotlight Seminars, presented by practitioners
- Self-paced professional learning via Northern Adelaide website resources

Effective PLC’s meet regularly and planning for this time is essential. Staff meeting time can be set aside for teams to meet. Consider reducing administration time in staff meetings or communicating information in different ways e.g. electronically. Using FIR time, TRT days, literacy budgets, pupil free days and accredited out of hours professional learning time are some options to create this time.

PLC’s rely on strong professional relationships. It is essential to determine codes of conduct, meeting procedures and shared expectations from the outset. Initially, PLC members reflect upon the professional learning and plan for implementation in the classroom. They then engage in a continual cycle of implementation, reflection, goal setting and evaluation of the effectiveness of the interventions.

When establishing professional learning teams, consider the structures in place

- Time, space and funding to support the development and operation of the teams
- Leadership within each of the teams for effective facilitation
- Alignment of whole site professional learning
- Structures to de-privatise classroom practice e.g. class observations, modelling
- Performance management / development and induction processes
- Documentation, sharing and celebration of success

Professional Learning Communities in the Northern Adelaide region

From 2010 to 2012 it is expected that there will be a progressive site uptake of the comprehension initiative. Professional learning communities at the site level are supported by the regional task force and include:

- Alignment and consistency of the work of the portfolio groups
- Professional learning for leaders focused on building literacy leadership capacity
- Professional learning to develop pedagogical expertise for site leadership and staff through the work of the Curriculum and Early Childhood Consultants, Speech Pathologists and other regional support staff.
Standards: What are we aiming to achieve?
Improved ____________
Using disaggregated data develop a SMART goal (what, for which group of students). The goal should articulate the improvement (from what to what)
e.g. Improve the % of ..........students from ___to____ who answer inferential comprehension questions correctly as measured by.................

Improvement Planning: What more do we need to do?
Where to from here?
What are the research-based strategies that lead to improvement in this? “Strategies that Work” and website resources ... needs.  Decide on a strategy to implement? (1 or 2 research based). Plan the implementation of the strategy – time-lines, sharing, reporting and measurement of improvement.

What data will demonstrate improvement? Begin with the end in mind!!
What data sets are useful? Collaboratively developed assessments, tests, moderated work samples, rubrics, engagement surveys, NAPLaN tests (beyond compulsory – think about using the on-line tests for samples of students) e.g. Year 3&4 teachers will plan and implement 6 lessons based on the teaching of inferential comprehension strategies between weeks 2 and 5 of term 2. In week 6 the learning will be shared with colleagues in PLC meetings and next steps will be planned.

Performance Reporting: Who will we inform and how?
How will we monitor progress (who, when and how)?
Who? Will we collect whole class data or focus on a cohort or 1+1+1 students?
What? Was the data collected useful? What needs improvement?
How? How can we share the learning beyond our PLC’s?
Who? Who else needs to know?

Intervention and Support: What will we do to ensure success?
What needs to happen to implement the strategy? (resources, professional reading, shared work, release time, observations, modelled lessons, staff meeting time)

1 SMART goal to start with
- Student focussed Specific Strategic
- Measurable
- Achievable Ambitious Attainable
- Realistic Results-based Resourced
- Time framed

1-2 research based strategies for each goal

Self Review: How are we doing? How do we know?
• Has the SMART goal been achieved?
• What classroom based strategies have had the most impact? How do we know?
• How do we maintain the improvement?

Where to next? Back to 1 for next cycle.

Figure 2: Comprehension Improvement Cycle – DIAf
Debbie Draper, Curriculum Consultant, Northern Adelaide Region, June 2010 for Building Capacity portfolio