

# Leading to influence as an instructional leader: A reflection on the Curiosity and Powerful Learning program

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This paper reports on the *Curiosity and Powerful Learning* (C&PL) program facilitated by David Hopkins which we participated in between 2020-2021. In this paper, we reflect on the impact of this program on our own director of educational leadership work and the work of the school leaders who participated in the program. This paper begins by providing some background information on our context and then explores the eight key school improvement steps from the C&PL program.

## Background

During 2020, we initiated and led the development of our directorate narrative with our Executive Director (ED) and Directors of Educational Leadership (DEL) colleagues since we believed this to be integral in assisting “us make sense of where we are and to remember where we are headed” (Hopkins, 2021b, p.11). This narrative provides a common anchor point for our leadership role across schools.

*In the past*, there were pockets of excellence across our Metropolitan North School Performance Directorate (MNSPD) with many networks still working in isolation. There were limited shared beliefs and understandings about quality teaching and learning, and limited responsibility and accountability for improved student outcomes. *Then in 2017* when analysing the international tests for PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), and the national results in NAPLAN (National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy), it was evident that New South Wales’ (NSW) student outcomes were declining, and the equity gap was widening. There was recognition that something had to change and change quickly. *So now* with the introduction of the school excellence model, the MNSPD has a sharper focus on driving improvement, with the DEL playing a pivotal role in this change. Research now informs our team to drive effective teaching and learning through an enquiry model. This research is directly linked to high impact professional learning to improve teacher quality and student outcomes regardless of their location and circumstances. *In the future*, we will amplify our collaborative work and share our expertise to build the DEL team’s capacity. Students will continue to be the centre of our decision-making, so that every student, every teacher, and every school will improve every year.

It is this narrative that has enabled us to proceed with purpose and precision in our leadership of *Curiosity and Powerful Learning* (C&PL) across The Beaches Network.

## Curiosity and Powerful Learning (C&PL)

The author of *Curiosity and Powerful Learning* and the facilitator of a professional learning program by the same name, Professor David Hopkins, explains it is designed for school leaders to “achieve their existing educational goals but more efficiently and with increased depth and precision,” underpinned by a “moral purpose” where student achievement of potential is an unrelenting focus (Hopkins 2021a, p. 5). The program provides opportunities for school leaders to focus on student learning as the central core and to create the necessary conditions or “learning environment” for all students to succeed.

Hopkins describes the need for “specified strategies and tools” along with a shared understanding of the moral purpose of the school and he contends that both are synergistic in that “we realise our moral purpose through strategic action; and strategic action is the means of delivering on our moral purpose” (Hopkins, 2021b, p. 8).

As participants of the C&PL program, we realised its potential for supporting schools in creating the conditions necessary for continuing the journey of school excellence. Following information sessions we ran with schools in our directorate, five schools indicated their intention to participate. These included four primary schools (small and large) and one secondary school (large, selective, comprehensive) involving over thirty-five school leaders and teachers. Each principal involved in the program showed strong commitment to build the capacity of their leadership team to drive student improvement and each worked with their teams to create conditions for this to occur.

Our reflection, then, is based upon Hopkins’ school improvement strategy - “Unleashing Greatness: A Strategy for School Improvement” and the eight steps he believes are a “starting point” for every school that needs to interact purposefully to achieve improvement (Hopkins, 2021b, p. 8). In the discussion that follows we discuss these steps with illustrations provided by the principals who underwent the program and introduced the program’s teachings to their school communities.



*One of the key strengths of the Curiosity and Powerful Learning program is the opportunity for schools to share their knowledge, ideas and expertise through collaboration that explicitly aims to improve teacher practices and student outcomes.*

#### *Clarify moral purpose*

A first key step which we facilitated with assistance from David Hopkins (connected through a video link-up) was clarifying moral purpose. This was generally something new for our schools to consider and through our professional learning sessions, all of us acknowledged the power of taking the time as a school community, inclusive of students, parents, and staff to articulate this.

The Principal of Manly Village Public School, Philippa Becker, provided this insight:

*When we were developing our school's moral purpose, members of our school improvement team reflected deeply about what they wanted our students to be able to do or to be capable of doing. It gave them a voice as valued contributors and defined a collective purpose on what matters most for our learners.*

The power of establishing this leadership action is linked to determining what the activities will be to achieve the intent. A key leadership action of the school improvement team was to use this not only as a springboard for the next steps but also to ensure it remained central to their school improvement journey.

#### *Focus on classroom practice*

We believe one of the strengths of the C&PL program is that it gives schools permission to spend quality time focusing on what

is happening in classrooms, a sentiment shared by participants in the program.

Julie Organ, Principal of Manly West Public School, shared their journey

*Each grade presented regularly at K-6 professional learning sessions with the gradual development of explicit teaching examples particularly in literacy and numeracy using the rubric from intermediate practice to expert practice developing a clear narrative, the pace of the lesson and co-constructed success criteria. We increased skills, by using student, teacher and peer feedback. We then used a novice to master approach, particularly with writing (such as composing texts) and then mathematics (such as learning to use skip counting and representing this on a number line.) This model displayed incremental skill development which allowed students to articulate their level of learning and discover what steps to do next. On this journey, teachers developed deeper knowledge and systematic implementation of the most effective strategies to improve student outcomes and to enable our students to become assessment capable learners.*

This approach reflects what City et al. (2009, in Hopkins, 2021b, p. 10) describe as “the instructional core” where teachers design an instructional task as the core focus and pedagogical knowledge, student learning, assessment, and curriculum frameworks interact to optimise student learning.

#### *Decide on the non-negotiables*

As a school leader, it can be overwhelming sometimes being across the policies and procedures required to effectively and efficiently operate a school. As the leading learners, principals are often conflicted about the time required to operationalise these policies to ensure key accountabilities are met. During our workshops, the principals often talked about unlocking quality time to be in the classroom to see and hear the teaching and learning occurring.

## Success Story

Kathy O'Sullivan, Principal of Northern Beaches Secondary College, Manly Campus commented that

*non-negotiables, once articulated and negotiated as essential parts of teaching and learning culture, enable a school to progress along a trajectory of certainty, shared values, and academic success.*

As Principal of an academically selective school, Kathy is acutely aware of the expectations placed upon staff and students to perform at a high level and clarifying the non-negotiables assisted in developing a focused pathway, free of other distractions.

*Articulate the narrative*

We worked with our schools to articulate their strategic narrative and schools found this essential in gaining traction with their school community. When the Principal, Executive, and teachers could tell their strategy and connect with emotion, their enthusiasm and energy for school improvement increased. Just knowing the reasons for a decision made it easier for the entire team to accept the decision for change. We utilised the work offered by Shawn Callahan (2016) in *Putting Stories to Work*, with one Principal describing the process as “life-changing”.

Philippa Becker commented that

*historically our teachers have worked hard to improve student achievement in targeted curriculum areas, resulting in short term, unsustainable gains. A big shift in our school's narrative has been to focus on a consistent approach to the improvement of pedagogical practice. The theories of action allow our school improvement team to drive this approach, providing opportunities for teachers to really think about their practice and their impact on student learning.*

*Utilise instructional rounds and theories of action*

Schools are busy places, and principals and their teams can feel like they are rushing from one issue to the other, we know this as both of us have been principals. By the end of the term and sometimes at the beginning, schools find it challenging to maintain a sustained focus on school improvement. We did not achieve our instructional rounds as anticipated due to the COVID-19 lockdown with this cohort, although Beacon Hill Public School was able to harness the classroom observations internally.

Peta Hanson, Principal of Beacon Hill Public School, explained that the first theory of action they explored was “harnessing learning intentions, narrative and pace” (Hopkins, 2021b, p. 12). In triads, staff were actively engaged in professional readings, collaborative inquiry, lesson planning, delivery, and observation, enabling them to analyse (using the rubrics in the manuals) key elements of the theory of action evident in impactful classroom practice. She said,

*Facilitating instructional rounds at our school enabled us to critically reflect on how impactful our actions towards achieving the initial theory of action had been. All staff were involved in the instructional rounds process, demonstrating a school-wide commitment to implementing the most effective teaching practices that enrich the learning experiences and attainment of our students. Instructional rounds, with the support of our network schools, assisted us to identify key strengths from our actions to date as well as areas for improvement. This empowered us to collaboratively develop the next steps in our professional development and school improvement journey.*

*Embrace peer coaching and triads*

Our schools embraced peer coaching in supporting the acquisition of their chosen theory of actions. The process developed by Bruce Joyce and his colleagues (2009) was established in all five schools. Peer observations were scheduled regularly and became the schools' primary professional learning focus for the year. The peer coaching sessions focused on the observations of the description, not evaluation or judgement, and observed the consistent implementation of the theories of action. Schools found peer coaching easier to implement when teachers were able to choose the establishment of their triad.

Susan Tickle, Principal of Harbord Public School, commented

*During each of the 3-week triad cycles, each member of the triad team would choose a professional reading based on the feedback given from the previous triad sessions for the group to read for the following cycle. This ensured all members of the triad (leader/experienced teacher/early career teacher) had equal opportunities to be engaged and lead the process each cycle. All triad members gave modelled lessons within their chosen KLA and the target “theory of action” was discussed once all members had completed their lessons. Feedback from all teams was that this increased engagement lessened the supervisor/mentor/ novice bias, thus allowing for more open and equal professional dialogue in a safe environment through shared best practice.*

*Practise instructional leadership*

We have found that the DEL role is instructional at its core. Our focus is setting direction for our networks, leading our principals and middle leaders with a focus on teaching and learning and keeping the main thing “the main thing.” This outlook reinforces the argument that enhancing learning and teaching is an essential priority for the role of the DEL, principals, and schools. Hattie's (2018) definition of instructional leadership really resonated with us:

*Instructional Leadership refers to those Principals who have their major focus on creating a learning climate free of disruption, a system of clear teaching objectives, and high teacher expectations for teachers and students. It is school leaders who promote challenging goals, and then establish safe environments for teachers to critique, question and support other teachers to reach these goals together that have the most effect on student outcomes. (p. 194)*

Through the implementation of the C&PL program, effective instructional leadership played an essential role in its success. The work of the DEL, principals, and school improvement teams in establishing influential professional learning groups that implement their theories of action with a focus on student improvement and building teacher capacity was essential. This capacity-building played a pivotal role in creating impactful professional learning from the inside out.

Susan Tickle explained that

*In order to be “lead learners,” all senior executives were paired into triads with an experienced teacher and an early career teacher in their first 5 years of teaching. This encouraged teachers to know that we were “walking the talk,” and valued the process as teachers in leadership roles. I cannot emphasise the positive impact this had across all triads, and I myself as a Principal gained so much from watching my colleague's lessons, as I hope they also took some learnings from mine. The focus was always on the students' learning and engagement, around “assessment for learning,” which we found led us into amazing conversations and research into formative/summative assessment,*



*student voice and quality teacher feedback. This would have never have occurred in a “delivered” professional learning on “assessment for learning.”*

#### Exploit networking

We both realised that we were central to building the local capacity building of our networks. The DEL role develops the network’s narrative with their team and leads as the network’s champion. As a result of the program, we created professional learning opportunities for the individual school improvement teams to show their internal ways of working based on the “theories of action.” This then built the with-in school capacity and consistent teaching and learning protocols.

Julie Organ commented that

*Many of our local schools with representations of Principal and Executive staff and two Directors regularly shared and reported back on their Curiosity and Powerful journeys across the network in 2020-2021. This gave opportunities for all of us to gain a deeper understanding of the use of the theories of action and principles of school improvement with varying primary and high school contexts using different and authentic focus areas. Teams gained more confidence by sharing specific examples of using triads and instructional rounds in their schools as well as sharing their student stories and professional learning journeys using the Curiosity and Powerful Learning Model.*

#### Conclusion

Our schools have been strategically purposeful in introducing *Curiosity and Powerful Learning* to develop an inside out approach to school improvement focused on student learning and teaching practice. They have been vulnerable, taken small steps, built an improvement team that has developed expertise and a commitment to action underpinned by a deep understanding that school improvement is ongoing and requires continual reflection to “unleash greatness.”

One of the key strengths of the *Curiosity and Powerful Learning* program is the opportunity for schools to share their knowledge, ideas, and expertise through collaboration that explicitly aims to improve teacher practices and student outcomes. It is essential to focus on collaboration in schools as it allows teachers to keep on developing and learning throughout their profession and everyday teaching lives (New South Wales Department of Education, 2020). Timperley et al. (2020) suggest that this form of internal collaboration and professional learning is the most powerful as most professional learning conducted through courses and workshops, external to the school, do not result in the sustained change needed. As Hopkins reminds us, *Curiosity and Powerful Learning* is not so much a program but a “way of life” and our schools have clearly demonstrated their commitment to this.

We would like to acknowledge the following Principals (and co-learners of the C&PL program) for their passion and commitment to “unleashing greatness” in their schools:

Philippa Becker, Manly Village Public School

Peta Hanson, Beacon Hill Public School

Susan Tickle, Harbord Public School

Julie Organ, Manly West Public School

Kathy O’Sullivan, Northern Beaches Secondary College, Manly Campus

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