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An exploration of the influence of school context, ethos and culture on teacher career-stage professional learning

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

School ethos and culture, and their influence on teacher career-stage learning, are integral yet often overlooked components of school-based professional development planning. An in-depth study was conducted over two years within and across three independent schools in Sydney, Australia utilising a collegial methodology centred on principles of action research and focused on continuous school improvement. It revealed how specific school contexts have a substantial and differential impact on teacher learning across all career stages from neophyte to principal. Each school’s ethos and culture were seen to produce a distinctive teacher learning culture that subsequently influenced whole-school planning for, and participation in, teacher professional development. Teacher growth, well-being and job satisfaction were integrally related to ethos and culture and further influenced by the specific characteristics of the career stage of the teachers and school executive involved. The study gave further insights as to how the nature of teacher learning changes according to career stage. It was evident from the study that, for teachers, the school that they are in has a sizable impact on the nature of their professional learning and how they develop differentially at each stage of their career path trajectories.

\textbf{The challenges of supporting teacher professional learning}

In an education world currently consumed by testing, results, international competitiveness, and a relentless pursuit of improved student learning outcomes, less emphasis has been given of late to the fact that teachers themselves are learners, and that the context in which they teach and their students learn is a key factor in shaping not only their professional performance and development but also their professional identities. This study explored two key dimensions of teacher professional development at the school level: the influence of school ethos and culture; and the influence of teacher career stages on teacher professional learning. For ease of reference, professional development is defined as the inputs through which teachers learn; professional learning as the personal outcomes of teacher participation in professional development and its subsequent impact on teaching practice.

Four things stand out within the literature relating to teacher professional development. First, and oft quoted, the almost self-evident observation that teachers are the greatest in-school influence on student learning (Hattie 2009). Secondly, teacher professional development is a key factor in influencing and
transforming teaching practice and optimising student learning (Muijs and Reynolds 2001, Timperley and Robinson 2001, Marzano 2003, Darling-Hammond 2006). Thirdly, school leadership and the policy and programme structures in which teachers work have the potential to be both an enabler or inhibitor of teachers’ moral purposes in being a teacher, their professionalism and their overall resilience (Hargreaves and Fullan 1992, Day and Gu 2010). Finally, and more recently, specific school contexts and the ways in which they call for context-specific leadership responses are acknowledged as important mediating influences on teacher and student learning (Day et al. 2016).

Perhaps, it is because of this latter factor in particular, that it is difficult to generalise or seek to implement a template of ‘good practice’ solutions that are meaningful across diverse school contexts. Perhaps too, that because of this, the literature basis of teacher professional development is somewhat diverse, even overwhelmingly so. It incorporates a number of themes relating to the types of professional development that are seen as most valuable in contributing to quality teaching and student learning (Timperley et al. 2007, Dinham 2008, 2016, Hattie 2009, Jensen et al. 2016).

Collegial teacher learning (Landvgot 2005, Timperley 2005, Schuck et al. 2008), professional learning communities (DuFour 2004, Hord and Hirsch 2008, Massey 2009), teacher observation and reflection (Hattie 2003, Timperley 2005, Fullan 2007, Swaney 2007) multi-mode planned and unplanned learning (Borko 2004, Ingvarson et al. 2005), action learning (Brady et al. 2008a, Aubusson et al. 2009) have all had their devotees over time. More recently, Jensen et al. (2016), in their analysis of four high-performing school systems, identified the importance of collaborative professional learning of teachers working with other teachers to improve teaching, learning and school culture. Central to this is the development of a capacity that enables teachers and school leaders to work together and share responsibility for their own professional learning and that of their peers.

In broader terms, the literature has consistently identified key elements of effective, school-based professional development programs including that which is strategic in nature (Fullan 2004, Smith 2008), well-coordinated (Dinham 2008), comprehensive (Darling-Hammond et al. 2009) and sustained (Turner and Mitchell 2004, Muijs and Lindsay 2007), while reporting that the widespread use of more traditional forms of teacher professional development delivery such as the once-off professional development course external to the school are considered, in themselves, to be inadequate (Sykes 1996, Borko 2004, Dinham 2008).

Policy-makers as well as regulatory and employing authorities require that principals, school executive and teachers make sense of all of this and design professional development programs relevant to their schools. While progress has been made in identifying the types of professional development that are effective (Hattie 2009), it is often ‘good practice’ in high performing schools that is described albeit sometimes with a cautionary note that good practice is not readily transferable from one school context to another. Research into the nature of what less-fragmented programmes might look like, and the way in which professional development can be designed both strategically and also collegially across teacher career stages in the context of a particular school has been considered warranted for some time.

What has been less apparent in the literature is the question of how the values inherent in the school’s leadership by way of the principal and executive team, and the overall school ethos itself, influence decisions about the strategies and programs required for teacher professional development as well as the school’s culture of professional learning that results. In the context of a specific school, it also raises the question of how ethos and culture impact on teachers at their various career stages. It is these questions that this study sought to explore.

**The study**

Schools are ‘complex organisms’ worthy of holistic study in context (Boyd 1992, p. 9). For the purposes of the study, school context was defined as the distinctive features of a school shaped by socio-economic, cultural, historical and geographical circumstances. School ethos was defined as ‘those values and beliefs that the school officially supports’ (Donnelly 2002, p. 134) and which in turn shape the overall purpose and direction of the school community. School culture was defined as the social
dimension within the school, created as a result of the school’s belief system and values (Tagiuri 1968) and which ‘acts as a social mechanism directing behaviour through institutionalised norms’ (Smey-Richman 1991, p. 4).

School culture in this study was explored through the lens of teachers’ professional development and their subsequent learning. As part of a broader study of school-based teacher professional development (Furner 2015), the study focused on exploring how teachers were learning across career stages in three schools, and how they were supported in their learning while going about their daily work. How and in what ways, if at all, each school’s ethos and culture were impacting upon teacher learning were key areas of inquiry. The schools participated voluntarily with a commitment to ongoing school improvement in this area rather than being chosen as examples of ‘good practice’ in teacher professional development per se.

Three Kindergarten to Year 12 schools in the non-government sector, all located in Sydney, Australia, were the focus of the study. A participant-observer research design was initiated with the researcher working iteratively with the three schools over a 12 month cycle in each in a study centred on principles of action research (Grundy and Kemmis 1981, Brown et al. 1982, Creswell 2008, Kemmis and McTaggart 2010). Overlapping cycles of planning, data gathering, analysis and reflection in the first school informed inquiry in the second school and, in the second school, the third. The study sought to identify outcomes both unique to a specific school as well as those that could be held to be common across the schools. Ethically, the work in schools had to be seen as collegial co-investigations into teacher development practice involving the researcher, school executive and teachers so that one did not dominate the other. What eventuated was a research design centred on multi-phased, site-based case studies working with school staff that had an interest in improving their whole-school programmes for teacher professional development.

Two dimensions, one vertical and the other horizontal, formed a theoretical framework for the study (McCulla 2011). The vertical dimension related to overall school planning incorporating how school priorities were identified and being interpreted in the school and the resulting strategies and programmes that were put in place for teacher professional development. The horizontal dimension considered the respective career stage of teachers and the perceived appropriateness of the professional development being experienced at each stage.

School 1 (identified as ‘Brooklee College’ for the purpose of the study) is a co-educational, non-selective, secular, Preparatory to Year 12 school in a middle-class area of Sydney. More than 1000 students are enrolled. School 2 (‘Jackston Grammar’), like Brooklee College, was established less than 50 years ago but in a lower socio-economic area by a group of parents who sought to establish a faith-based school. The school has developed into a Pre-K to Year 12 co-educational, non-selective school with over 500 students. School 3 (‘Maxvale College’) is also a faith-based school and, comparative to the other two schools, a relatively new school. It is in a low socio-economic area and is slowly expanding. The school teaches less than 200 students from Years 3 to 12. Within the schools 30, 18 and 6 teachers directly participated in the study respectively through interviews and focus group discussions, a total of 54 teachers. Each of the schools was at a different stage in the development of its professional development programme.

The questions guiding the research explored how and in what ways school context, ethos and culture were shaping decisions being made about professional development in the school generally and at each of the career stages outlined below. The research design was informed by cycles of reflection on practice and action specific to each of the case study settings. Action research was used as a guiding set of principles due to its appropriateness to school settings and benefits for teachers (Parsons and Brown 2002, Creswell 2008, Aubusson et al. 2009, Mertler 2012) and its capacity to promote learning in and through action while collaborating with others on personal and organisational improvement (Passfield 2001). Importantly for this study, it implied a ‘bottom up’ rather than ‘top down’ view of teacher development (Burns 1998, p. 356).

The action research framework that was used enabled the researcher to work as a co-researcher collaboratively with the teachers and school executive in each school as they considered their professional
development needs. Face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions encouraged teachers at their various career stages to reflect on how they were learning in the context of overall school planning. Data gathered from these sessions was analysed to identify points of commonality and difference between both career stages and individual schools. A survey and a consideration and analysis of school print and electronic documents were also utilised in the research design. Feedback was provided to each school as a final phase. The school's response to the data and its analysis was invited with subsequent reflection and planning for further action remaining the responsibility of the school.

**Findings**

The findings presented below relate to the vertical dimension of teacher learning as it centres on strategies and opportunities presented for teacher professional development that permeate through the school, and the horizontal dimension as it relates to teacher career-stage learning.

**The vertical dimension of teacher development**

The nature of the planning, implementation and evaluation for teacher professional development was found to be significantly different in each case study school. As a consequence, the different ways in which the schools planned and coordinated their teacher professional development programmes impacted upon teacher learning somewhat differently in each school. Teachers became accustomed to what the school planned and provided in relation to the school's professional development programme. They accepted what was offered and adjusted their expectations as learners accordingly to align with, and fit into, the school culture in which they worked.

In these schools, it was the principal, more than any other person, who determined the school's mindset about teacher development and that significantly influenced the school’s professional development programme and, subsequently, teacher learning. Executive staff were also found to be instrumental in ensuring that the school’s ethos, as espoused by the principal, and supported by the executive, was embedded in the school’s cultural practices in relation to teacher learning. The executive staff could be regarded therefore as a second layer of leadership ethos influence on teacher learning. The effect of school ethos on teacher learning was further enhanced by leading teachers (middle managers) who had an impact on teachers as they drew upon the school’s ethos to both inspire and inform everyday practices in the school. Middle leaders could be regarded as a third layer of leadership ethos influence on the teachers and their learning.

In summary, the three levels of school leadership principal, executive and middle leaders were found to have had an impact on teacher learning in each of these specific school contexts. This was done through promoting the permeation of a distinctive school ethos into the cultural practices of the school, which in turn contributed to the formation of a unique teacher professional development and learning culture within each school. School ethos was, therefore, a key determinant in how teachers went about their professional learning in each school. It led to both explicit and implicit messages about teachers as learners, and significantly influenced how teachers learnt within each school, as revealed in the brief snapshots that follow.

Teachers at Brooklee College generally regarded themselves as avid and committed learners, and expressed an acceptance and enjoyment in the school’s belief that teachers were ‘leaders in learning’. They regarded learning as an important part of their professional identity and as a crucial part of their professional persona. They held high expectations of the school’s professional development programme and annually engaged in a range of onsite activities, preferring collaborative and collegial learning within their own school context. Teachers also exhibited knowledge about teacher learning modes, attributing this to both whole-school workshops on how teachers learn provided at the school, through to their own learning from direct study, which was prevalent amongst staff.

Teachers at Jackston Grammar generally considered themselves as ‘gifted by God’ to be teachers, and that learning to be distinctively Christian teachers was an important response to God and their
school community. The school’s ethos to provide Christian teaching and modelling to students, parents and each other had become an intrinsic motivation for their learning choices. Aside from the school’s professional development days, their main source of learning occurred informally, with teachers using the highly collegial and collaborative culture to share, observe and assist each other with learning about teaching pedagogy and student welfare. They also used their personal beliefs about life and people as a means of learning, often using prayer and biblical study to reflect upon the learning of their students and to inform further planning and improvements to their teaching.

Teachers at Maxvale College looked to the school’s ethos to inspire their learning. They considered themselves as important within a family context, representing and supporting parents in their responsibility to educate their children. Learning about how to teach students well and how to assist them to develop in character and wisdom were considered key areas for learning. Within a small school context, the teachers assumed responsibility over their own areas of expertise and had both teaching and leadership responsibilities. As teachers were usually the only ones at the school in a particular stage or faculty, they often requested more formalised mentoring within the school and networking professional development opportunities beyond the school.

Teacher expectations and aspirations about learning differed and were based on the overall school beliefs about teachers and their learning. The context and ethos of each school set the tone of what was thought and articulated about teachers as learners, including the language they used to describe their learning. The context shaped what they regarded to be the purpose of their learning, the place of learning in their daily practice, what they aspired to learn, and were expected to learn. As an illustrative example, one teacher commented on how the Christian ethos of the school had changed her way of learning as a teacher. Previous to joining the school she had not been in very collegial environments. She now looked to her colleagues more readily for assistance, ideas and exploration of pedagogies in what she described as ‘a safe and supportive’ learning environment.

I regard my colleagues as welcoming, helpful, collegial and as having a high degree of ethical behaviour, and this impacts greatly on my willingness and capacity to engage in learning at the school.

The horizontal dimension of teacher learning

Parallel to the interest in how teachers learn collectively, there has been an evolving interest in how the focus of professional development changes as teachers move through a career trajectory from neophyte to experienced school leader. As broad stages unquestionably exist, the question is one of how and in what ways the nature of professional development does change over time for the individual teacher and how school contexts influence that transition. If career stages do differ qualitatively one from the other, it also raises the question of how the nature of professional development might be more explicitly targeted, at least in part, to the kind of learning teachers value at each stage.

It is recognised that fully understanding the career trajectories of teachers, or the nature of the teacher learning that is characteristic, or indeed optimal, at each stage, has remained problematic. There are many mitigating personal and professional factors that occur over the working life of teachers and variability in the contexts in which they work (Day and Gu 2010). Nonetheless, some efforts have been made over time to describe broad characteristics of teacher career stages (Fessler 1985, Louden 1991, Huberman 1993, Kelchtermans 1993, 2009). Bayer et al. (2009) made the observation when discussing teacher career trajectories that the term ‘career’ usually refers to positions and to ‘rising through the ranks’ but, that in relation to teacher development, this is not easily defined or described. Day et al. (2006) have cautioned that assigning year lengths to each stage in a teacher’s working life can be problematic if too rigidly applied as considerable variations occur amongst individuals and contexts. Nonetheless, Day and Gu (2010), when conducting further research in relation to teacher effectiveness and how this changes over the course of the careers and lives of teachers, identified six professional life phases related to the years of teaching: 0–3, 4–7, 8–15, 16–23, 24–30 and 30+. Day et al’s (2006) research also revealed that teachers’ sense of positive professional identity was associated
with well-being and job satisfaction, with access to quality professional development cited as a significant contributor to this state. Different career stages and changing personal lives, they argued, can affect teachers’ perceptions of work satisfaction, commitment and motivation, and that this in turn, impacts on schools and ultimately on student learning outcomes.

Teachers in the case study schools were invited to reflect on their professional development to date utilising an open-ended teacher questionnaire on their preferred modes of learning, and through face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. Five broad career stages were identified from the literature for the purposes of this aspect of the study and as a basis for analysis, mindful of the permeable nature of each: early career teachers (up to 3 years’ teaching experience); experienced teachers (4–7 years); expert teachers (over 8 years in the profession); leading teachers (holding formal leadership roles within the school); and school executive (principals and teachers at deputy level).

Eight key ways in which teachers learn were derived from the literature to provide an exploratory framework in which to chart individual responses by teachers in one-to-one interviews. They were:

- Learning through collegial conversations – Landvogt (2005), Schuck et al. (2008) and Timperley (2011)
- Learning through feedback from students and colleagues – Brady et al. (2008b), Desimone et al. (2002), Dinham (2008), Easton (2008), McLelland (2007) and Timperley (2011)
- Joyce and Showers (1995) and McCormack et al. (2006)
- Learning through reflection – Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) and Doppelt et al. (2009)
- Learning through observation and being taught by others – Fullan (2007), Hattie (2003), Swaney (2007) and Timperley (2005)
- Hands-on and creative learning – Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) and Lamb et al. (2007)
- Learning through directed study, reading and writing Doecke et al. (2008)

The outcomes of data analysis were compared and contrasted across the three schools. Learner profiles emerged across the five career stages. The commonalities that emerged are outlined below. The profiles gave insights into how qualitatively different the learning was at each of the career stages, both in what teachers responded to and what they observed as being ineffectual for them at that particular career stage.

Early career teachers (1–3 years of teaching) - The ‘I need it now’, concerned learner
Early career teachers were focused on developing classroom management strategies that helped them achieve classroom environments that were centred on purposeful learning. This included both proactive and reactive classroom management strategies and the development of a teacher persona that enhanced their relationship with students. They were also engaged in a steep learning curve in relation to subject mastery and knowing when and how to use pedagogical tools most effectively.

Shared concerns amongst early career teachers included completion of their teacher accreditation requirements and feeling alone in their learning, even though amongst supportive colleagues. They exhibited concern and anxiety about not knowing what to learn, or when, and about what learning they needed to know to meet school requirements, particularly the setting of assessment tasks, marking and reporting.

Early career teachers least desired to engage in professional development sessions about school ethos, history or goals. They also did not want to attend professional development sessions if they had marking or student reports to complete, suggesting that time management was also an issue.

Experienced teachers (4–7 years of teaching) - ‘The excited learner’
The focus of learning for experienced teachers was still on the classroom, but there was a shift towards learning that would enhance their pedagogical teaching practices. These teachers responded positively,
and even reported enjoying conversations with expert and leading teachers about their classroom techniques. They developed new resources based on their own experiences and through sourcing subject material on the internet. They were interested in experiential learning, and regularly tested out their innovative ideas to engage students and enhance their learning in their classrooms. They then used reflection, either alone or informally with others, to tease out what had been learnt and what the next step in their learning might be. Learning tended to be more random than planned, but intense when it occurred.

Experienced teachers disliked professional development that was about anything that they already knew, preferring to learn new ideas and to be challenged in their thinking and practice.

**Expert teachers – (8 + years of teaching) - ‘The confident learner’**

Expert teachers were in general more flexible learners who were confident about their capacity to find solutions and adapt to change. They were particularly interested in using researched and proven pedagogies skilfully, and never superficially. Learning opportunities that appealed to them needed to be rigorous and intellectually stimulating. They also used assessment-for-learning reflection practices, and were avid learners in relation to student pastoral care requirements. They were keenly aware of the impact of school context on their learning, and set specific priorities for their learning based on their own judgement, while trying to ensure that they aligned with what was believed to be best practice teaching at the school. They learnt through assisting colleagues and were focused on improving student learning through informed use of student assessment and feedback.

Similar to experienced teachers, expert teachers also disliked professional development that had content that was already known to them. In addition, they disliked generalisations being made about any topic, but in particular student learning, regarding these as unsubstantiated unless developed in relation to students in their particular school context, and unhelpful in general.

**Leading teachers – (Formal leadership roles) – ‘The serious learner’**

The focus of leading teachers in their learning was to meet the learning and practical needs of their staff. They were intent on learning how to model the effective use of pedagogies to their staff and to lead them towards innovative and confident practice. Leading teachers were interested in learning about good practice in leadership and how this impacted their staff, and ultimately, student learning. They were aware of the importance of their roles in middle management in relation to the resilience of teachers and the learning outcomes of students. Leading teachers also sought learning opportunities that would update them on changes and external expectations in relation to curriculum development and student duty of care. They were often involved in postgraduate study and keen to know about what they needed to learn to enable career development opportunities.

Leading teachers disliked professional development that involved mass presentations. They preferred niche learning, which related to their level of understanding, knowledge or expertise, or their educational passions and areas of interest.

**Executive leaders – (Principals and deputy principals) – ‘The focused learner’**

Executive leaders were fully focused on learning whatever was needed to enhance the effectiveness of the school. The first priority was upholding, sharing and strengthening the school ethos and they were proactive in seeking out learning opportunities that would better equip them to develop and implement school goals based on ethos that would then flow on to further developing the culture of the school. Staff and student needs were intrinsic motivators for their learning, as they remained abreast of government requirements. They engaged in short-term and long-term learning about leadership, read widely about educational trends and change, and used their personal beliefs to guide deep reflection on their task and the needs of the school.

Executive staff considered that attending as much professional development as possible with their staff was important to supporting teachers in their learning, but had little expectations of school-run professional development sessions for their own learning per se. Rather, they looked to external
providers including the school system, professional associations, universities and their own leadership networks for their professional learning needs.

**Discussion**

The study, although limited by its scale, compensated by its depth of inquiry over time in the three schools involved. It provided insights into the overall planning for professional development and learner profiles of five career stages across the three case study schools. The study revealed a degree of consistency across the schools as to what teachers liked or disliked at each of the stages while also revealing how qualitatively different the nature of professional learning was across the career stages. It also revealed just how much school context and ethos influenced each school’s professional development programme.

What was of particular interest was, when teachers were given the opportunity to discuss the nature of their own learning, how it emerged as a topic of considerable interest in all schools. Teachers knew that their learning was important to them both personally and professionally, and to their capacity to enhance the learning of students. However, they knew very little about career stage learning and wondered why it had not been a well-discussed topic within their own schools, or transparently embedded into their school’s professional development programme. It may well be that with such a strong and necessary focus on student learning in schools, and the articulation of professional standards that describe what teachers do and often linked to performance review and development cycles, the actual nature of the learning that teachers do, or would like to do, at various career stages has taken more of a back seat.

While considerable attention has been paid to forming professional learning communities to address specific goals, issues or needs within a school (Harris 2008, Harris and Jones 2011), one implication arising from this study is for each school to also consider the extent to which it also encourages teachers at different career stages to discuss the specific nature of their professional learning with view to supporting groups of teachers at that career stage.

Teachers in the case study schools also revealed a keen interest in learning more from teachers at other career stages suggesting that mentoring and coaching, or professional companionship (Degenhardt 2013), could be utilised in such professional development activities as groups combine. The following diagram (Figure 1) illustrates the three ways in which career-stage learning might be used to benefit and enrich teacher learning within school contexts by first focusing on the specific needs of the career stage; secondly, establishing an overall school plan where all career stages are catered for; and finally, providing a form of mentoring through teachers engaging with colleagues in the next career stage.

One interesting finding that emerged from the study was that early career teachers clearly appreciated structures where the principal and executive team demonstrated an interest in their learning. Where such initiatives were occurring, it was leading to improved understanding, collegiality and trust and the building of robust professional relationships that enhanced the school’s overall teacher learning culture.

**Drawing the horizontal and vertical dimensions of teacher learning together**

Teacher perceptions about how they learnt varied considerably across the case study schools. They were influenced by school ethos and culture, and the career stage of the teachers themselves. Teachers made comments related to their growth, job satisfaction and to how they perceived these as impacting on their overall sense of well-being. The extent to which school ethos and values were transparent, known and shared tended to vary within schools according to career stage with principals and school executive being most aware and early career teachers being the least aware.

Evidence also emerged from the study as to the preferred modes of learning generically in each school. From the eight modes of learning outlined above, three preferred modes of learning emerged
with common results across the three schools: learning within the school context; learning through collegial conversations; and learning through feedback from students and colleagues. The findings here support the emphasis being placed on these aspects (Dinham 2016) but also suggest that, alone, it is insufficient. The different context of each school, and its ethos and culture, significantly shaped how teachers did, or did not, learn within each of these common modes of learning.

**Implications**

Several implications arise from the study. First, if each school’s culture of teacher professional development and learning is indeed shaped significantly by the school’s context and ethos, it follows that this needs to be discussed openly and made more explicit in each school with particular attention being given to early career teachers in helping them to understand how and why teachers are supported in their learning in that school. Explicit conversations are needed to make transparent and affirm the key values on which the school is operating and how they are embodied in its ethos and culture. It is through this lens that good practice in teacher professional development and professionalism is interpreted. That is not to say that generic ‘good practice’ frameworks for teacher professional development are not of some value as the basis for review, reflection and discussion on school practice. Indeed, what was of interest in this study was the need articulated in the first school and replicated in the other schools for a research and evidenced-based framework for teacher professional development planning to be used as a discussion starter in each school and against which the school could self-evaluate its programmes. Such a framework was developed for Brooklee College and subsequently further developed for use in the other schools. Principals in particular were advocates for such a framework to underpin reflection and programme evaluation. A framework was also developed for teachers. The relationships are summarised in Figure 2.
A second and highly important theme that emerged was that school leaders had not considered using the career stages of teachers as a focus within their professional development programme, nor were they tailoring some of the content to particularly suit the learning needs or aspirations of teachers across different career stages at the school. Greater understanding by school executive as to how teachers are currently learning at each career stage within the particular school, evaluated against descriptors of the general nature of learning at each career stage, would seem to be a useful way forward. The distinctive learning needs of principals and aspirant school executive through the career trajectory of the principalship should also be included.

The cyclical nature of the relationship between school context and ethos, career stage learning and the formation of professional learning teams targeted to school priorities that emerged in the study is represented in Figure 3. It points to some of the interrelationships that need to be taken into consideration in designing whole-school programmes supporting teacher professional learning. The study suggested approaches that centre on the use of action learning to ensure collegial learning conversations and whole-school collaboration can result in changes and ongoing improvement to professional development programmes.

Teachers in each case study school reported difficulties in knowing where and how to best start an evaluation of their whole-school professional development programme and what tools may be available for them to use ‘on the ground’. It is in this context of action learning that frameworks of good practice were seen to be useful when also integrated with data about the nature of their own teachers’ career-stage learning and the expectations of professional teaching standards. Figure 3 shows these interrelationships diagrammatically.

Much was also learnt from the study about how teachers regard their schools in relation to their own learning. It was found that they were willing to change their expectations as learners to accommodate school context and ethos. Teachers, on the other hand, also held their schools accountable for the

Figure 2. The interrelationships between school context, ethos, culture and teacher professional learning and identity.
effects on them as learners. They made observations as to whether or not the school was authentic in relation to being committed to their learning in terms of the provision of enough time for particular modes of learning to occur. These observations and assumptions further became embedded in the teacher learning culture, and were passed on from one career stage to the next, and to new teachers as they settled into the schools.

Given that the main focus in this study was on the continuous improvement of each school's professional development programme rather than on an individual teacher's professional development per se, it does raise the question as to whether individual teachers felt constrained or uplifted by their school's ethos and culture with respect to CPD. Given also the explicit faith-based ethos and culture of two of the schools, it also raises the question as to whether teachers chose to join and stay in their school because of that ethos and culture. The study did give some insights into the deeper impact that the faith-based values of teachers in two schools had on their attitudes to their own professional learning and to supporting the learning of others. In Brooklee College, the vibrancy of the professional learning community that had been established as an integral part of school culture came to the fore. Given that no school is values-free, and that school ethos is stated quite variably across schools, questions such as these are worthy of deeper investigation not just in faith-based schools but also in schools generally.

One question of some significance that arose from the study, and somewhat ironically for a profession focused on learning, is the question of why it is that how teachers learn at various career stages is not taken into account to any great extent in either the policy architecture for, or the implementation of, professional standards frameworks. Standards-referenced approaches to teacher professional development and to career path progression, often linked to performance management frameworks, have become commonplace in many education jurisdictions. (See for instance, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) 2016a). These frameworks describe the knowledge, skills and attributes that teachers and school leaders are required to demonstrate through career pathways such as a graduate, proficient, highly accomplished or lead teacher. A standard has also been set for principals (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) 2016b).
While professional standards serve as the basis for review and reflection on practice and the setting of aspirational targets at the various career levels, little attention has been paid to the differentiation in teacher learning in each of the career stages of that trajectory. Australian studies have shown a greater acceptance of the standards amongst pre-service and early career teachers in their first five years than amongst practising professionals of over 26 years experience (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) 2016a). That said, the attrition rates of new teachers and the problems of retention are widely documented suggesting some disparity is in place.

Overall the evidence also suggests that, while school leaders and teachers generally have positive intentions regarding the use of standards, embedding their use in teaching practice is sometimes seen as ‘hard work’. Darling-Hammond and Lieberman (2012) have observed that the critical question is one of how the standards are used and of how they lead to stronger learning opportunities and more common sets of knowledge, skills and commitment across the profession. Understanding the career stage learning needs of teachers would seem to be integral to this cause. It does seem somewhat ironic then, with professional standards frameworks focused essentially on what effective teachers do at various career stages, and with the professional development literature advocating more collegial and school-based approaches, little room has been left for a focus on teachers themselves; on how they learn best at each career stage, broadly defined; on the kinds of professional development that might best support learning at that stage; and on how such integrated learning can be a major contributor to building the ethos and culture that a school is seeking.

Concluding remarks

The limitations of this study are clear in the restriction of the research to three independent schools, albeit over a considerable time frame. The study does however raise the question of how indeed school context, ethos and culture shape the learning in ‘independent’, non-government schools. These schools constitute around one-third of all schools in the Australian context. Striepe (2016) has highlighted, as a further instance, the influence of spiritual aspects embodying faith and values, and personal contextual factors, on Islamic school leaders’ perspectives of leadership. Given that no school can ever be ‘value free’, the place of ethos and culture in determining the nature of career-stage teacher learning in both government and non-government schools is worthy of exploration.

The study revealed that, by raising the question of how teachers are learning and prefer to learn at various career stages in a specific school context, questions of values and purpose automatically surface as do the underlying influence of school ethos and culture. It was only when a degree of values clarification on teacher learning and development in each school had taken place that its teachers felt better equipped to self-evaluate their collective progress against frameworks of good practice. Interpreting individual school contexts, therefore, appears to be central to our better understanding of teacher learning and development. ‘One size fits all’ approaches to teacher professional development adopted from elsewhere, no matter how well intentioned, cannot translate well to teachers working in the context of a particular school given the mitigating issues involved at the local level.

School leadership was revealed in the study as a powerful influence, defining and supporting the ethos of the school and permeating the school’s culture. School leadership influenced both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of teacher learning and was embodied in the school’s professional development programme which in turn impacted upon teacher learning at all career stages. The study raised the question as to whether the vertical dimension with its links to the overall strategic planning and targets of the school had come more to the fore than the horizontal dimension with its focus on career-stage relevant professional learning. With career path development in a number of jurisdictions now tied to professional standards frameworks for both the attainment and maintenance of current competence, and to aspirations to higher order professional accomplishment and accreditation, it seems that a focus on how teachers learn at the various stages of their professional growth, and not just on what they are to learn, is indeed timely.
Although limited in scale, the study opened up the question of how teachers themselves viewed their professional development at varying career stages, and how differential career-stage learning needs might be brought into a better alignment if a school is to truly prosper as a professional learning community. It has suggested that more research into, and across, teacher career-stage learning would be warranted.

Due recognition also needs to be given to the sociocultural factors that shape teachers’ work beyond the school. Along with others, Blackmore (2004) has observed the dissonance that can arise between teachers’ professional and personal commitment to making a difference for all students based on principles of equity on the one hand, and their emotional response to performativity requirements based on efficiency and narrowly defined and predetermined criteria of effectiveness and success on the other. In that sense, performativity (‘being seen to be good’) and passion (for ‘doing good’) can often produce counter-intuitive impulses. With regulatory frameworks that require the alignment of teacher professional development with standards frameworks and system and school strategic priorities and goals, care has to be taken that we do not lose sight of the teachers themselves and their shared values at an individual school in this pursuit in what, after all, is the learning profession.

Disclosure statement

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