

Policies that Support Professional Development in an Era of Reform

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Understanding the conditions through which teachers' acquisition and use of new knowledge and skills are enhanced informs our understanding of effective models of professional development. In this article the authors examine some design principles to guide policy-makers and school reformers who seek to promote learner-centred professional development which involves teachers as active and reflective participants in the change process. They aimed to explore:

- the role of teachers as learners and teachers
- new designs for professional development
- school culture and how it relates to critical enquiry
- elements of effective curriculum frameworks
- messages emerging for policy-makers and administrators concerned with professional development for teachers

Key findings

Traditional notions of in-service training or dissemination need to be replaced by opportunities for 'knowledge sharing' based in real situations. Teachers need opportunities to:

- share what they know
- discuss what they want to learn
- connect new concepts and strategies to their own unique contexts

This can be done either through professional organisations or informal 'critical friend' relationships.

Systems need to be in place allowing:

- blocks of time for teachers to work and learn collaboratively
- strategies for team planning, sharing, learning and evaluating
- cross-role participation (teachers, administrators, parents, psychologists)

District (or local authority) leadership must encourage and sustain schools as reflective communities and provide the necessary resources.

This requires rethinking ways in which staff development is funded and managed. The success of new policies depends on effective local responses to specific teacher and learner needs.

Involving teachers as both learners and teachers

The authors argue that in today's climate of reform, teachers need to rethink their own practice and teach in ways they have never contemplated before. Success, according to this study, depends on how teachers are able to learn the new skills and un-learn previous beliefs and practices. Teachers must be in a position to see the new methods from the pupils' perspectives and therefore pre-packaged training is not always effective.

Professional development today is not solely concerned with supporting teaching and knowledge. Support is also needed for teachers to reflect on their current practice and adapt new knowledge and beliefs to their own teaching contexts. The authors suggest that effective professional development must:

- engage teachers in practical tasks and provide opportunities to observe, assess and reflect on the new practices
- be participant driven and grounded in enquiry, reflection and experimentation
- be collaborative and involve the sharing of knowledge
- directly connect to the work of teachers and their students
- be sustained, on-going and intensive
- provide support through modelling, coaching and the collective solving of problems
- be connected to other aspects of school change

Exploring new designs for professional development

The study suggests that teachers need to integrate theory with classroom practice. They need time and opportunities for exploring knowledge about the nature of (new) learning and how it might be implemented in different domains. There should also be:

- opportunities for teacher enquiry and collaboration
- strategies to reflect teachers' questions and concerns
- access to successful models of (new) practice

Professional Development Schools (PDS) aim to bring together these learning strands. Since the late 1980s PDS have set out to design programmes in the USA which involve:

- novices working alongside experts
- professional development for experts in the form of new roles as mentors, HE liaison or leaders
- teachers, researchers, and educators working collaboratively in practical sessions
- teachers with dual roles as colleagues and learners
- a learner-centred foundation

Sustaining these attitudes, roles and practices in classrooms requires both internal and external support. The authors argue that PDS schools could be future training grounds for 'internship' but would need funding.

How can new knowledge relating to pupil achievement be accessed and debated?

The authors suggest the following forums as fruitful breeding grounds for new knowledge:

- school/university partnerships which can create new and powerful knowledge. In particular they can produce more practical, contextual grounded theory and more theoretically grounded broadly informed practice
- teacher to teacher and school to school 'critical friend' systems: collaborative work on real issues and the opportunity to work with colleagues from other schools and open up to new ideas
- youth organisations, for insight into home-school culture and students' own interests
- district and national organisations, to provide a formal platform for examining practice

Strategies for encouraging professional development within schools

School culture must be conducive to critical enquiry, and provide opportunities for professional dialogue. According to the authors such opportunities do exist already, but may not be used effectively. For example department meetings may be viewed as 'an administrative bore'. Professional development of teachers should be integral to school policy. Giving teachers a new role, for example teacher-researcher, can stimulate professional growth.

Peer reviews can foster critical examination of practice, as can peer coaching. Teacher-driven assessments of learning and teaching have been found to be effective in generating discussions about new practices. These systems of self or peer reflection, examining the effectiveness of teaching and student learning, enable teachers to change their view of effective models of practice, creating a process of transformational learning for teachers.

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- strategies for team planning, sharing, learning and evaluating
- cross-role participation (teachers, administrators, parents, psychologists)

Externally, local authority leadership can encourage and sustain schools as reflective communities.

Reforming curriculum policy

There are two cornerstones of the USA reform agenda:

- a learner centred view of teaching
- a career-long conception of teachers' learning

Those responsible for new curriculum frameworks need to address questions about:

- developing an active role for teachers in the new curriculum design
- the need to assess students' understanding of theories as well as recall of facts
- the need for students to be active learners
- involving school leaders as active participants
- whether new methods are conducive to teaching for understanding
- giving teachers a rationale for adopting the new curriculum

Teacher training and evaluation

The authors draw out a number of messages for those involved in teacher education in the US. In particular, they suggest that:

- teacher education institutions need guidance on the demands implicit in teaching for understanding
- licensing, testing and evaluation of teachers must reflect new understanding about student learning and effective teaching
- ongoing evaluation of practice must value honest reflection of practice
- the evaluation process should not focus exclusively on measuring transmission skills
- training should emphasise the 'appropriateness' of teaching decisions
- evaluation of leadership must take account of whether administrators have been effective in establishing and supporting a culture of learning and enquiry
- administrators and leaders needed opportunities to rethink practice and learn new skills

Making it happen – support from policy-makers

The authors argue that all these objectives require time for teachers to undertake professional development. This means that policy-makers need to rethink ways in which schools are staffed, funded and managed. They suggest that:

- existing resources could be redistributed through incentives, grants or changed formulae allocations to provide time for collegial work and professional learning
- policies must move away from 'credit for seat time' staff development, towards professional development that involves teachers in networks, working collaboratively to explore practice
- tight boundaries and narrow accounting lines discourage teachers from reflecting on school wide goals or the needs of individual children. The success of new policies and initiatives will depend on local responses to specific teacher and learner needs
- proposed and existing policies can be filtered through the following criteria to examine how well they correspond to teachers' learning and change. For example, does the policy:
 - reduce the isolation of teachers
 - encourage teachers to assume the role of learner
 - provide a rich menu of opportunities
 - establish an environment of professional trust and encourage problem solving
 - provide opportunities for everyone in the school to understand the new concepts and practices
 - permit the restructuring of time , space and scale
 - focus on learner centred outcomes that address the how and why aspects of learning?

Implications for leadership

Whether formal or informal, all systems of professional development must be flexible and able to respond to changing needs of teachers and professionals. Teachers must be at the centre of change. The authors argue that policy-makers must be mindful that:

- structures that are effective in one school may not be transferable to a different context
- systems may work well for a period but then need revising as contexts change
- networks may be managed through “systematic ad-hocism”, moving forward towards shared goals with flexibility in strategy
- supporting teachers’ learning communities may involve allowing structures and arrangements to evolve rather than relying on permanent plans and promises
- the ‘web’ providing ongoing and multiple opportunities for debate and critical reflection needs to be core to any policy for change

Support from all types of organisations from professional associations, national boards, networks of schools must ensure that:

- teachers have real and valued input in curriculum development, assessment, and evaluation of practice
- funding must support active teacher participation in design as well as implementation of new practices
- opportunities are created for networking, seminars, focus groups to provide a platform for debate
- policy should support the ‘environment’ for learning rather than rigid systems and programmes which can lead to “meaningless activities and out of date structures”