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# Learning in Teacher Professional Development

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**Abstract:** In this qualitative interpretivist study the interrelationships among teachers' professional practice, the knowledge gained in teacher professional development programs, and the context of employment within school settings were analyzed. Eighteen semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews were conducted with elementary, middle and high school teachers who had attended continuing education programs 9-12 months previously. Findings indicate that teachers construct a knowledge base by moving back and forth between continuing professional education programs and their professional practice. This process of knowledge construction is affected by elements of the structural, human resources, political and symbolic frames of the contexts in which teachers are employed. Implications for research and practice in teacher professional development are drawn.

## The Issue/Problem

Professional development for teachers has increasingly become an important issue as the standards movement (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001) gains momentum across the United States. With an increased emphasis on assessing teacher performance based on professional standards, professional development programs are experiencing greater scrutiny. However, numerous authors have indicated that the present teacher professional development programs are not meeting the goals of facilitating teacher learning and have called for a new approach to teacher professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2000). However, before we can begin designing new professional development programs for teachers, we must first understand how teachers learn in the context of their practice. The use of knowledge in professional practice is an important issue in teacher professional development for a variety of reasons. First, schools spend billions of dollars annually on professional development programs. Second, most professionals go through the process of professional development without a clear understanding of how to link their learning to their practice. Finally, researchers in the field of adult education have long been active in the study of professional learning (Cervero, 1985, 1992; Houle, 1980) yet, little of the knowledge base within the field of adult education or the research in professional learning has been incorporated into teacher professional development programs.

## Literature Review

Explored in this study were the interrelationships of three major concepts: knowledge, context, and professional practice. Knowledge, for the purpose of this study, was viewed as a social construction of information that occurred through a process of constructivist learning and perspective transformation (Ausubel, 1986; Brunner, 1990; Mezirow, 1991). To examine the context of professional teaching practice, Bolman and Deal's (1997) framework was selected. Bolman and Deal (1997) demonstrated that schools and organizations can be viewed through

four different lenses or frames, including the structural, human resources, political, and symbolic frame. The structural frame draws on concepts from sociology and emphasizes formal roles, defined relationships, and structures that fit the organizational environment. Within the human resources frame, organizations have individuals with needs and feelings that must be taken into account so that individuals can learn, grow, and change. The political frame analyzes the organization as comprised of groups competing for power and resources. Finally, the symbolic frame abandons rationality and sees organizations as tribes with cultures propelled by ceremonies, stories, heroes, and myths.

The development of professional teaching practice has been looked at from three perspectives in the literature: program development and effectiveness, individual teacher development, and new ways to foster teacher learning. Research on program development and effectiveness indicates that the process is complex, ever changing, and involves multiple strategies and various components at various times (Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love, & Stiles, 1998). Kennedy (1999) found that successful programs focused not only on the subject matter or the pedagogy, but on how students learned particular subject matter. The impact of professional development programs on promoting individual teacher development has also been examined. Ashton, Buhr, and Crocker (1984) found that high efficacy teachers had high academic standards, focused on academic instruction, articulated well-developed student expectations, developed on-task behavior, and created a supportive classroom environment. Finally, new ways to foster teacher learning have been proposed. Proposals include aligning professional development programs with national teaching standards, creating professional development programs that are continuous, and increasing both variety in subject matter and pedagogical expertise. The literature cited here indicates that understanding teacher professional development requires an understanding of the interrelationships of knowledge, context, and professional development in teaching. And yet, as Porter, Garet, Desimone, Yoon, and Birman (2000) indicate, "Despite the amount of literature, relatively little systematic research has been conducted on the effects of professional development on improving teaching" (p. 6).

## Research Questions

The following research questions have been advanced to guide this inquiry. (a) What makes knowledge meaningful in the context of teaching practice? (b) How is the construction of knowledge affected by the different frames of the context in which teachers practice? (c) What are the interrelationships between knowledge, context, and professional practice?

## Data Collection and Analysis

To analyze the above research questions, teachers working in a large Midwestern school system were interviewed 9 to12 months following their attendance at a university sponsored teacher development program. A "purposive sample" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of 18 teachers was recruited, including elementary teachers, middle school teachers and high school teachers. Data in this study were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis.

Verbatim transcripts were created from the tape-recorded interviews. Subsequently, two data analysis strategies were employed. First, the researcher created a concept map (Novak, 1998) that depicted the connections the study participant described among learning, context, and professional practice. Second, a category system was created and all data were coded within

categories.  Two quality control mechanisms were employed in this study.  First, member checks were employed during the interview process.  Second, all study participants reviewed the concept map created from their interview for accuracy and completeness.

## Findings

Study results indicate that teachers who attend professional development programs use this new information to continually construct and reconstruct their knowledge base.  Teachers described how their knowledge base is constantly changing and that experiences, attendance at professional development programs, and dialogue with colleagues all contributed to the continual growth of their knowledge base.  For example one teacher indicated:

> As a teacher, one gets kind of caught up in their own little world of doing what they do.  You teach; you don't look at the big picture.  Continuing education classes that I've taken have allowed me to see that big picture more.  So it gives you a better sense of what the whole educational system is about - it expands what you know and what it means.

Teachers in this study described how their knowledge base is changed each time they learn something new.  The new information learned in professional development programs was added to a teacher's knowledge base through a complex process of thinking about the new information, acting on the new information, and identifying their feelings about the information.  Teachers indicated that the new information had to connect to other concepts before it was meaningful to them, and part of the process of making knowledge meaningful was to use it in practice in some way.

### How Knowledge Becomes Meaningful in Professional Practice

Teachers actively described how professional development programs helped them learn content that they used in their teaching practice.  Teachers interviewed in this study had learned content related to math, science literacy, family school communication, teaching strategies, teaching with technology, and curriculum development.  Teachers were not only able to describe what they learned but also indicated how they use the information they learned.  For example:

> I really learned that it takes a family to initiate and continue the child's development and education.  I really feel that it's a huge component, whether it is a single-parent home, a two-family home, or even adopted/foster.  I mean, we learned about all different types of family situations.  And it was a real eye-opener.

What we see in this statement is that teachers were constantly thinking about the information they learned.  They thought about it, discussed it with peers and administrators, and often tried out an activity before the knowledge became meaningful to them in their practice.

Teachers in this study also explained that for the knowledge they learned in professional development programs to become meaningful, it had to be linked to some feelings they had about the information.  Teachers described how continuing education programs were often a review, and they felt good about the review as it refreshed their memory.  Teachers discussed how they felt refreshed following continuing education programs, as if they had gained new

insight. They indicated that professional development programs facilitated an open-minded approach and helped prevent negative attitudes.

Teachers also indicated that professional development increased their confidence and enhanced their creativity. Teachers explained that a major role of professional development programs was not only to keep them up to date, but to help support teachers in being willing to try new ideas and to foster a creative approach to teaching.

In addition to thinking and feeling, the third element that fosters knowledge becoming meaningful in a teacher's practice, is action. Action may be implementing something they learned as this teacher indicates:

> We had a math night and a reading night where we invited the parents to come in, and we had dinner. And then we had a "make it take it" night to help them make learning projects that they could do with their own children.

Teachers took specific ideas they had been exposed to in a professional development program and used them in their classroom. Often the use of these ideas was similar to what had been presented in the professional development program, but teachers were also very clear that they took the "seed of the idea" and then modified it to fit their own situation.

Teachers acted on the information in another way. Often this involved sharing knowledge or getting involved in planning for changes at the school. Teachers would find that they could use the knowledge gained in professional development programs to influence a planning process or a decision-making process. For example:

> Well, now that I've had more classes, it's getting harder and harder to sit back and just kind of go with the flow. It's like, "Oh, wait a second, this isn't right." It makes me want to be more vocal and try to change some of these things that are going on.

For the teachers in this study, knowledge from professional development programs became meaningful as they engaged in a process that involved thinking, feeling and acting on new information. Teachers did not take something they learned in a program and simply apply it in their classroom. Rather, they analyzed the information and then were motivated or inspired to try a particular action with the information. At this point, then, the knowledge was more meaningful and more integrated into professional teaching practice.

### *Context*

The complex process of knowledge construction described in the previous section of this paper occurred in a particular practice context as well. Teachers in this study described two types of organizational structures in their schools. Some described a decentralized structure, where they were assigned to grade level teams and given the authority and autonomy to control their teaching practices through the team. In this situation, teachers felt that they could use a great deal of information from professional development programs because in conversation with other team members, they would decide how to use, modify and/or adapt the information to their school and grade level. In contrast, some teachers described a more traditional bureaucratic system. In these systems, it was most often the principal and assistant principal who were in charge. Teachers described how, in these organizations, they were often cut out of decision-

making processes and this impacted their ability to use new information in their practice. For example, one teacher stated:

Really the administration and the staff have to work together, and it's just not happening. The staff are being told a lot of things they must do, and they're not being included in the decisions, which really needs to be done.

An additional structural factor that teachers described as impeding their use of information from professional development programs was the school's curriculum and the process used for student assessments. The structure of the curriculum and the volume of assessments seemed to prevent teachers from attempting to incorporate too many new ideas into their teaching. Teachers indicated:

Some of what got in the way of using the information is the pressure to get through-performance assessments. You know, a lot of the drama activities would be really cool to do and to incorporate into project-based learning, which would be any teacher's dream to do. But the fact of the matter is I need to push my kids through six assessments before the end of the year. So a lot of it what if learned, I felt like, "Ok, how would I ever get to this?"

Within the human resources frame, teachers describe two predominant factors that seem to impede their use of new information from professional development programs: the role of orientation and the role of other teachers. In this study, teachers described the welcome and orientation to their school as having a large impact on their willingness to use new ideas in practice. Some teachers described orientation programs that assisted them in making the transition from being a new graduate to becoming a teaching professional. However, the overwhelming majority of teachers recalled that they received little or no orientation to their school. Many teachers explained that they were hired at the last minute, given a quick presentation on benefits and salary, and then assigned to a classroom and "turned loose." One teacher described how he spent the week before classes began putting together desks in his classroom, and then on the first day of class realized he had nothing prepared for the students but, he stated, "they did have a place to sit." The lack of orientation programs left teachers feeling devalued, as if their role was one of "discipline and classroom management" rather than teaching.

The second factor that teachers described as impacting their use of new information in practice was the role of other teachers, specifically veteran teachers. Teachers often indicated a hesitancy to talk with other teachers about new ideas, not because they felt colleagues would actively block them from implementing something new, but because of a feeling that others were not interested. Consider the words of this teacher in the study:

I would say the thing that mostly gets in the way is other teachers because a lot of times they don't want to hear—in the building I'm in right now there are a lot of seasoned teachers—they'd rather do things the way they've been doing them. Teachers themselves, they would be the ones that would stop me from sharing.

Bolman and Deal (1997) make a clear distinction between the political frame of the organization and the symbolic frame.  And yet, in this study that distinction is not quite clear.  Often it seemed in teachers' descriptions that the culture or symbolic frame of the organization arose from the political frame.  As such, the findings presented here are related directly to the political frame.

In describing organizational politics, teachers clearly described the impact of both internal politics and external politics on their use of knowledge from professional development programs.  In terms of internal political issues, teachers described coalitions between some administrators and teachers saying, "Well, it is the favorites that get to do things."  Teachers also described the allocation of resources as an issue impacting what they did in their classrooms.  Teachers indicated that at times they did not even suggest something they had learned because they knew their school or district just "did not have the money for that."  Finally, teachers described that the power vested in administration impacted not only what they did in their classrooms, but how they used new information in teaching.

In addition, teachers described how the external politics of school reform, standards, and state mandates impact their use of knowledge from continuing education programs.  What teachers described was a feeling of being overwhelmed with the changes, mandates and reforms.  They also described a frustration with not being included in the development of these reforms.  Teachers clearly felt that things being imposed on them were out of their control and that their input into these changes was not welcomed.  Teachers described how they would "go through the motions" of attending mandated educational programs, and then return to their classrooms and "do what I know would work."  Teachers' feelings about mandated reforms seem to have created a vicious cycle of passive resistance to knowledge in education programs.  Consider this teacher's statement:

> We've started doing some of the reforms at my school.  Now that they have this balanced literacy in the district, a lot of the teachers, are getting like, "You know what?  I'll wait this out.  This will be a thing for three to five years until the next big thing comes along, so I'll do as little as I can to appear like I'm following the rules until this burns itself out." So they'll go to the meetings and not really pay attention.  They'll meet with the balanced literacy coordinator, but they won't really know where this fits.  There's no real "buy-in" to this reform because they just feel like, "eh, it'll be gone in a few years."

The above statement is a very common description of how external political issues impact teachers' use of new knowledge.  As this teacher indicates, there is suspicion about the change, uncertainty about the value of the new information, and distrust in a new program that may not be around long enough to invest time and energy in learning about it.  The following teacher sheds some light on why this happens and how change after change impacts teachers' views of using new knowledge in practice.

> My theory is that when you start teaching—there's some reform that comes down and you jump on the bandwagon and you embrace it wholeheartedly and then your school drops it after a year or two years or doesn't really support it.  So I think for them it's just, "This too shall pass; I'll do my job the way I know how, the way it works for me and why bother changing?"  Because anything they're going to tell me to do will change . . . You've got these outside folks coming in or legislators coming in saying, "Ok, you need

to do this, you need to do that," without necessarily consulting the people who've been doing it for years.

## Conclusions and Implications

Teachers in this study described how knowledge from professional development programs became meaningful when they engaged in a process of thinking about the information, identifying feelings about the information, and taking some action with the information. It was clear that teachers did use information from professional development programs in their classrooms and offered that information in broad-based curriculum discussions in their school. And yet, there was a great deal of information learned in professional development that was not incorporated into a teacher's practice. The overriding barrier seemed to be the context of the school. If the context of the school was very hierarchical with little colleague support, teachers often did not try new ideas in their practice. Finally, the mandated reforms and curriculum changes that are part of the school context seemed to have a large impact on the use of new information. These externally mandated changes left teachers feeling overwhelmed, resentful and often they resisted using information presented about these mandates.

This exploratory study initiated an examination of the connections between teacher professional development and the context of teaching practice. More research in this area is needed, specifically, research that includes a larger sample of teachers and a more longitudinal focus. Additional research is also needed on how teachers develop their practice. In this study there were many references to teachers with numerous years of experience being unwilling to change their practice. What factors contribute to this? What differences exist between teachers who spend time and effort developing their expertise and those who do not? What impact does the context of the school have on this process? A greater understanding of the processes involved in teacher development has the potential to improve not only the delivery of programs to teachers, but also the impact of those programs on student outcomes.

## References

References available upon request.

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