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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AS A CRITICAL COMPONENT OF CONTINUING TEACHER QUALITY

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Abstract: Professional Development is critical for improving and maintaining teacher quality and the effect flows on into the classroom. Factors influencing the success of Professional Development activities include potential for workplace change, the diverse effect and understanding of adult learning principles, subject specificity, effective mentoring and the relevance of the presented material. Relevant Professional Development plays a major role in school reform and mentoring programs including new teacher induction and can enhance the benefits of sharing expertise between generations.

Introduction

It has long been recognised that the most important thing a teacher can do is continue to learn. The American Federation of Teachers recognises that “continuous, high quality Professional Development is essential to [that] nation’s goal of high standards of learning for every child” (AFT, 2002) and more importantly, the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, states that the Government’s key priority in schooling is to raise the “quality, professionalism and status of teachers and school leaders”. (DEST, 2000) To that end in 2000 the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program was established. The aim of the program is to provide Professional Development to teachers Australia wide. After review the program was deemed successful and funded for a further four years to 2009. The need for quality Professional Development for teachers is recognised at the highest levels of modern Western Society.

Improving teacher quality can improve learning outcomes for students according to Andrew Leigh from Australian National University (Teacher, 2007). Leigh’s study, *Estimating teacher effectiveness from two-year changes in student’s test scores*, asserts that “a teacher in the top ten percent of performance can achieve in half a year what a teacher in the bottom ten percent can achieve in a full year” (cited in Leech, p23). Some would argue that the accuracy of any study about measuring student outcomes can be rife with difficulties, with regard to accuracy, but most would surely agree that quality teachers can only improve student outcomes. Professional Development is critical for maintaining continuous improvement in teacher quality.

Given the rapid changes in work practices, such as the use of technology (it is absolutely necessary for teachers to be computer literate) and the increased availability and volume of information, many issues arise with regard to best practice

adult education or Professional Development for teachers. Schools are an area with very specific needs and requirements in terms of Professional Development. What adult learning principles might influence the effectiveness of professional development for teachers? What factors might inhibit or enhance Professional Development success for teachers? Are there factors within the school environment that may affect learning outcomes?

There are a great number of theories about how and why adults learn. As with theories about how and why children learn, nearly all are based on either the behaviourist or cognitive approach from a psychological point of view. Stein, McRobbie and Ginns (1999) identify some common themes underpinning several theories and models of adult learning principles, namely those of Shulman (1987), Hargreaves and Fullen (1992) and Guskey (1986). Most pointedly they refer to the need for existing beliefs and knowledge of learners to be considered, non critical assistance with personal reflection, engagement in professional dialogue and a feeling of personal responsibility for learning. Teachers also need time and opportunities to test new ideas. This is a very humanistic approach to Professional Development. Lefrancois, 1994, asserts that humanistic psychology “is concerned with the uniqueness, the individuality, the humanity of each individual.” (LeFrancois, 1994, p.240) Burns (1996) agrees, and argues that adult learners come to any learning environment with personality traits and values and attitudes that all affect the learning that takes place. These values and attitudes affect the way the trainer is perceived by the learner and also the way in which the learner perceives the content. This point is supported by Sternberg’s theory of thinking styles (cited in Burns, 1996). He defines three different styles of “self government” (Burns, p.65). The legislative style, when planning and organising and creativity are more important than actually carrying out the plan, the executive style, when following an established plan in a structured environment is important, and lastly the judicial style, when analysing and evaluating a plan is at the forefront of thought. Sternberg indicates that while all three styles function in most people, one will dominate. These three very different styles of thinking would certainly influence individual perceptions of any given situation. An example of such a difference springs to mind that occurred at a recent Professional Development day. The facilitator asked participants to compile a list of things they hated about such days. About half the group agreed that butchers paper exercises were boring and the other half agreed that these types of activities were useful and even fun. Another Professional Development day focussed on spirituality and asked participants to share some defining moments in their life or career. Some participants found the stories inspiring and interesting, while others, once again, bored.

The Australian Council for Educational Research refers to Professional Development for teachers as “a vital component of policies to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in schools” (ACER, 2005). There are many factors that can inhibit or enhance the effectiveness of any adult learning program. Differences in styles of learning are one of many factors that contribute to different beliefs about the efficacy of Professional Development. Another factor affecting the success of Professional Development for teachers is linking the principles to practice in the classroom. Too often what takes place is not particularly relevant to what is actually taking place in classrooms. Swaney, 2007, says that this is not because we don’t know what types of programs are effective for Professional Development for teachers, but because we too often choose inappropriately. Take for example the following three Professional Development attempts.

The first focussed on the Enneagram, a tool for gaining insight into what sort of person and therefore what sort of learner a person is. A large part of a day on this topic became quite tedious and left no doubt that most participants found it quite interesting but irrelevant. Each of the other days focussed on actual science that takes place in the classroom. One occurred at the Children's Medical Research Institute and included hands on experimenting and useful resources and ideas, and another in a high school Science lab, run by a Chemistry teacher. Both offered an opportunity for professional dialogue and networking. Real experimenting took place and the laboratory once again seemed an exciting place. A feeling of inspiration ensued and participants went away having gained expertise and exciting lesson ideas and tools. These examples highlight that at least some Professional Development must be subject specific.

Experiences like those mentioned above provide an opportunity for professional dialogue and both assisted and non assisted non critical reflection, both essential for effective Professional Development for teachers. Non critical assistance with personal reflection is an important area of personal development for teachers, particularly in conjunction with engagement in professional dialogue. Burns, 1995 (p185) agrees in stating that "reflection on experience is a crucial factor in motivating the adult and in the learning process itself". For this reason it is common and beneficial for teachers to participate in networking days for Professional Development. Reflection can be either personal or collaborative, with both kinds offering a different degree of benefit, and some recommend a combination of collaborative reflection and the use of narrative (Gillentine, cited in *Journal of early Childhood Teacher Education*, 2006, p 343) as tools for effective Professional development. Gillentine's study considers the impacts of narrative and reflection, on teacher's "beliefs, values and practice, and sense of professionalism". He asserts that the study confirms that this is a valid method for Professional Development because the participants shared teaching knowledge and "validated participants as experts within the context of their own teaching". Attard and Armour (cited in *Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy*, 2004, p 209) presented similar findings. In their research, *A case study of one teacher's early-career professional learning*, they found that although the beginning teacher found the process of critical reflection difficult, he benefited "because it gave him a powerful sense of control over his professional learning and his professional life". While there is a great deal of literature that supports the use of reflection as an important part of continuing Professional Development for both beginning teachers and established teachers, not all agree. Day (1993, p 83) argues that reflection in itself is not enough. He asserts that much of the "literature and practices" that claim to enhance teacher growth "fail to consider the need for reflection to be accompanied by confrontation if development is to occur". It may be that the reflective process would be more beneficial if it involved a whole school community approach, thus alleviating the potential to make beginning teachers feel singled out and allow for non critical confrontation to guide the reflective process. Implementing such a system of Professional Development would surely require strong and supportive leadership to avoid creating discontentedness among staff.

There are many poor examples of Professional Development attempts. It would be difficult to disagree with Costa and Marzano, 2006 (cited in Swaney, 2007) about their view of professional development choices. Often, some random and unsolicited facsimile shows up in the staffroom and someone says "Looks good. Let's go" and so we do. They refer to this as the LGLG approach. Costa and Marzano go on

to explain how the LGLG approach fails in terms of effectiveness. In concurrence with other studies and my own personal experience they cite the vague relationship to the classroom, no preparation required, simple dissemination of information, little relevant activity and no real application as adding up to very little actual Professional Development.

Keeping subject specific plays a key role in the effectiveness of Professional Development. An example of a Professional Development program that has been measured as successful is the Primary Connections program. This program aims to address the projected shortage of skilled Science professionals by empowering Primary teachers to cope with the desire for a lot more science to be taught in schools. Primary Connections delivers hands on practical training for Primary teachers that can be translated into the classroom (Peers, 2007). One participant, who had previously admitted to avoiding teaching Science, is quoted in Peers' article as saying "if only I'd had the experience of Primary Connections early in my career" (p 17). Research cited in the article indicates that nearly 100 percent of participant teachers reported that their teaching of Science had improved. Professional development opportunities are available ranging from indigenous immersion to pure mathematics. Keeping it relevant is sometimes overlooked.

Professional Development is also the key to any educational or school reform. Change can take place if Professional Development is relevant and systematic. Change and reform are inevitable with constantly developing ideas of what constitutes best practice in teaching and learning and societal changes. Information and computer technology in the classroom is a typical example. As little as fifteen years ago many classrooms and in fact teachers did not use computers. Today that situation has changed radically. Computers are used in lesson preparation, lesson delivery, research and communication to name just a few applications. This type of paradigm shift demands a systemic approach to professional development for teachers. A Report to the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, in support of systemic Professional Development lists four main criteria (Downes et al, 2001). In essence they are:

- Development integrated with a comprehensive change process
- A reciprocal relationship between individual and organisational development
- The need for individuals to plan their development to suit school needs and schools to plan according to individual or faculty needs
- Promotion and sustenance of organisational and individual teacher change

Some of these goals are not easily achieved. Schools like any other organisation are fragmented, which creates difficulty with any systemic approach. Most schools have individuals in managing roles, individuals in pastoral care roles and individuals in teaching roles, with many individuals wearing more than one of these hats. Burns, 1995 (p83) identifies this problem by suggesting that "the fundamental organising principles of organisations currently obstruct the learning process". He also says that "the fragmented nature of bureaucratic organisations tends to prevent employees thinking for the organisation or themselves in a holistic manner".

Teachers must be a fundamental part of any systematic change in schools. David Carless (Curriculum Perspective, 2004) discusses at length reform strategies in Hong Kong schools. As discussed earlier, the individual differences that adult learners bring to the table must always be considered. For reform to take place in schools much professional development and professional dialogue must take place. Carless argues that "a failure to recognise teachers' past achievements, experiences and challenges is likely to alienate them from and/or reduce their commitment to any new reform

agenda” (p 49). Carless also discusses the incidence of teacher resistance to change in the program he is studying, which is the introduction of a new program for teaching English as a second language. Experience shows that teachers are usually resistant to change which makes them tend toward resisting some Professional Development offerings, as quite often the development represents the introduction of new ideas or alterations to current practices. Are teachers really resisting some developments because it might add to already difficult workloads in terms of paperwork. Carless interviewed some of the teachers involved in his research who indicated that this was indeed a problem.

A great deal of learning that teachers pursue, normally for higher qualifications such as Master and PhD awards, occurs through means of external learning. The idea of a “restricted professional” and an “extended professional” was proposed by Hoyle in 1972 (cited in Frost, 2006). Hoyle argued that the restricted professional focussed on the classroom and the extended professional had a more theoretical approach and viewed the school in a broader sense. Teachers who attempt to extend their agency or “ability to make a difference”, (Durrant and Holden, cited in Frost, 2006), by undertaking further research or study face a unique set of factors that may influence their success or failure rate. Limited time, job stresses, family commitments, motivation, high costs and access to research materials are just some examples of difficulties that individuals may face when seeking to learn through distance education. Some would argue that these inhibiting factors are worth overcoming. For example Stenhouse, (1975, cited in Frost, 2006), argues that it is important for teachers to integrate inquiry with teaching to maintain professionalism. Frost (2006), while in some agreement with Durrant, Holden and Stenhouse, argue that opportunities for leadership are “powerful learning experiences”. Another area of potential learning that occurs is peer facilitated Professional Development. This is common for smaller ideas and more directed information, such as individual behaviour or education plans for particular students. There seems to be little motivation for teachers to pursue further education. Generally it is self funded, provides no monetary benefit and is of only slight benefit in professional advancement. A typical school with a staff of about fifty teachers may only have two or three individuals with higher than Bachelor qualifications for these reasons. The Australian Catholic University’s (2001) response to the New South Wales Department of Education and Training’s Review of Teacher Education in New South Wales, when commenting on the proposal to introduce an Australian Graduate School of Teaching, writes, “Given the lack of support by funding bodies and employers for postgraduate teacher development, this proposal seems to represent a well intentioned but inappropriate approach to enhancement of research and postgraduate teacher development” (p 2).

With many teachers approaching retirement age and enrolments rising, induction and mentoring of new teachers is becoming a focal point for professional development in many schools. Schools and universities have traditionally and still do offer and require new teachers to attend practicum experiences and undertake an internship in order to graduate. Mentoring is a practical way to pass on important traditions, information, procedures and knowledge both of subject content and classroom management skills. This type of adult learning is often called intergenerational learning and is recognised as a practical and successful teaching and learning practice. It is not only in education that the ageing workforce gives rise to some concern. When interviewed by the ABC in 2004, Ron Anderson, Executive Director of Adult Learners Australia discussed this problem. He says that “workplace

learning is becoming crucial to meeting these numerous and changing demands” (Anderson, 2004). Mentoring is non formal learning and is quite different to learning in formal settings. Anderson presents the view that intergenerational learning is “different from what is offered now in formal courses”. He goes on to describe this informal adult learning as “context bound”. A school is a very specific context, and “emphasising learning over training”, is particularly relevant to the school setting. He also says it “depends on the responsibility for learning being spread amongst a number of people in the workplace”. In schools this is usually teachers from the relevant faculty. Chris Eddy, Principal of Bellaire Primary School, where a strongly supported mentoring program exists, has this to say about its success:

The use of a critical friend or mentor is a powerful Professional Development strategy that allows graduates and new teachers to our school to learn directly from more experienced colleagues, that provides opportunities for frank and confidential critical discussions, that fosters reflection and goal setting, that enhances career guidance, and that provides a unique opportunity to develop personal and professional relationships with colleagues. (Teacher, 2007, p 15)

Evans-Andris, Kyle and Carini (2006) do not agree that mentoring is as successful as many would argue. While recognising that there is a “strong relationship between teacher mentoring programs” and “patterns of teacher retention” and that “high quality preparation, induction, and mentoring programs can lower attrition rates and enhance teacher effectiveness” (p 289), these authors find fault with the mentoring framework commonly used. In their study of a Kentucky Internship Program the results showed that the “emotional and technical support through mentoring proved inadequate in meeting needs”, and that “interns wanted structured professional development including information sharing, peer networking, and evidence of professional growth” (p 289). Conversely to Evans-Andris, Kyle and Carini, Odell (1992) surveyed teachers four years after beginning and found that they reported emotional support as the greatest benefit of mentoring (p 200). These findings would indicate that a range of strategies would be more useful and appropriate, for beginning teachers at least. Koro-Ljungberg and Hayes (2006) also agree that “mentoring is an important vehicle for immersing new members into a community of practice and ensuring their success” (p 389) but they too identified problems associated with the practice. Their study examined the mentoring experiences of ten female graduate students who reported some positive and some negative incidents. One student with a male mentor reported “problems related to her minority status” which led to her mentor being dismissive, unhelpful and derogatory. This student’s confidence was affected and future study plans cancelled (p 399). The choice of suitable mentors is critical for the practice to succeed.

What qualities are important in a suitable mentor and what knowledge and expertise should be passed on? Achinstein (2006) calls this suitability “political literacy” (p 123). An ability and willingness to impart knowledge about much more than just classroom teaching is imperative if mentoring beginning teachers. Sometimes the stress of starting out can be greatly alleviated by something as simple as knowing how to jiggle with the photocopier and get a few more copies, or understand which office staff member is willing to help with typing. A new teacher needs much more than just help in the classroom, they need help navigating the politics, culture and day to day administration of the school. Each school has an individual set of these factors. Experienced teachers have a wealth of knowledge to

pass on to new teachers and also teachers that are experienced themselves but are new to any school. The role of mentor is multifaceted and must be so for successful induction of both new teachers and staff new to any school. A close relationship between an experienced teacher and a beginning teacher may assist in identifying the likelihood of beginning teacher burnout. The rate of attrition is high among new teachers and is largely attributable to the pressures of the job. In equipping mentors with the necessary skills for mentoring this should be considered. What about teachers that need help and are not new to the profession? Apparently mentoring and reflection can be useful for these individuals too. A study by Gail Flesch (2005) finds that intensive mentoring, along with discussion and reflection encouraged teachers in difficulty to improve their practices and bring about useful change (p 69).

Goddard, O'Brien and Goddard (2004) assert the importance of noting early warning signals of burnout and the mentor is in an ideal position to monitor the beginning teacher. The signs of burnout should be easily recognised by a mentor who is assuming a close relationship with a beginning teacher, or an experienced teacher requiring assistance. Goddard et al describe burnout as "a chronic state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that arises in personnel from the cumulative demands of their work" (p 857). Mentoring in respect to minimising the incidence of burnout could be equally useful across the range of teacher ages and experiences. According to Goddard et al, a study conducted by Fimian and Blanton in 1987 revealed that burnout rates are almost identical in beginning and experienced teachers.

Some barriers to adult learning are more subtle but may be just as complex as those already mentioned. Adult learners are often asked to reflect on their own experiences and to share those experiences and reflections openly. This process, for some, introduces an element of risk. The risk element may stem from a fear of laying oneself open to ridicule for example, or may stem from the learner's perception of the subject matter or even the teacher. Whatever type of barrier, according to Boud and Walker (1993) the barrier may be learned, and the individual may have an impaired ability to respond to it. They also point out that most experiences are more complicated than just that, but are linked to other experiences and it is not possible to actually separate them out.

The importance of continued learning for teachers is clear, although there are many factors that can enhance or inhibit teacher Professional Development. Popular learning theories such as cognitive and behavioural theories explain some of these factors, but not all. In reality the parameters are extensive and the problems are much more complex. Uncontrollable ingredients play a major role, such as individual differences and experiences, but the sheer volume of possibilities for Professional Development, are a problem in themselves. Professional Development opportunities for teachers may take many forms, ranging from mentoring, induction, external study for higher qualifications, reflective studies of facilitated learning. Whatever the delivery method the major consideration should be how relevant the instruction is. There is little or no benefit, no matter what the delivery method or individual differences of the participants, if the material is not useful and relevant.

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