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Learning and Context: Connections in Teacher Professional Development

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Abstract: This qualitative interpretivist study analyzes the interrelationships between, the knowledge gained in teacher professional development programs and the context of employment. Findings indicate that teachers construct a knowledge base by moving back and forth between continuing education programs and their professional practice. Implications for research and practice are drawn.

Professional development for teachers has increasingly become an important issue as the standards movement (Thompson, C. & Zeuli, J., 1999) 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. The implied expectation is that professional development programs should assist teachers in meeting the national performance standards. However, numerous authors have indicated that the present teacher professional development programs are not meeting the goals of facilitating teacher learning and application of new content in their classrooms. Darling-Hammond (2000) indicates that the “issue is having professional development that is sustained, content-rich and curriculum-embedded instead of what we call the sort of ‘drive-by-workshop’ or ‘spray-and-pray’ approach to professional development” (p. 8).

However, before we can begin designing new professional development programs and systems for teachers, we must first understand how teachers learn in the context of their practice. How do teachers develop their practice? What are the relationships between information presented in teacher professional development programs and the use of that information in the school or employment context? What impact does the context of teaching practice have on the development of knowledge?

Conceptual Framework and the Purpose of the Study

Explored in this study were the interrelationships of two major concepts: knowledge and context. Knowledge, for the purpose of this study, was viewed as a social construction of information that occurred through a process of constructivist learning. Constructivists (Brunner, 1990; Novak, 1998) believe that individuals create knowledge by linking new information with past experiences. Within a constructivist framework, the learner progressively differentiates concepts into more and more complex understandings and also reconciles abstract understanding with concepts garnered from previous experience. New knowledge is made meaningful by the ways in which the learner establishes connections among knowledge learned, previous experiences, and the context in which the learner finds himself.

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 and technology. Within the human resources frame, it is believed that organizations have individuals with needs and feelings that must be taken into account so that individuals can learn, grow, and change. Within the political frame organizations are viewed as comprised of groups competing for power and resources. The tools of this frame are bargaining, negotiation, coercion, and compromise. Finally, through the symbolic frame organizations are viewed as tribes with cultures propelled by ceremonies, stories, heroes, and myths. This framework was selected for

the research reported here because it provides different lenses by which the researcher can examine and analyze the context in which teachers conduct their practice.

The literature cited here indicates that comprehending teacher professional development requires an understanding of the interrelationships of knowledge and context. And yet, as Porter, et al indicate, “despite the amount of literature, relatively little systematic research has been conducted on the effects of professional development on improving teaching or on improving student outcomes” (Porter, Garet, Desimone, Yoon, & Birman, 2000, p. 6).

Specific Questions the Study was Designed to Address

This study used an interpretivist framework to search out the relationships and meanings that knowledge and context have for each other. The following research questions were advanced to guide this inquiry. (1) What makes knowledge meaningful in the context of teaching practice? (2) How is the construction of knowledge affected by the different frames (structural, political, human relations, symbolic) of the context in which teachers practice?

Data Collection and Analysis

To analyze the above research questions, teachers working in an urban school system were interviewed 9-12 months following their attendance at a university of sponsored teacher development program. A purposive sample of 18 teachers was recruited, including eight elementary teachers, seven middle school teachers and three high school teachers ranging in age from 25-45. Data in this study were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Participants were questioned to determine what they had learned or not learned, how they incorporated or did not incorporate that information into their practice, and what aspects of their practice they determined to be significant in fostering their learning. Participants were also questioned about the context of their practice including the organizational structure, human resources, politics, and culture.

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 and context. Second, a category system was created and all data were coded within categories. The categories were used to identify thematic areas articulated by participants.

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 was 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.

How Knowledge Becomes Meaningful in Professional Practice

For knowledge to become meaningful in professional teaching, practicing teachers actively engaged in a process of thinking about the information learned, identifying feelings about the information and taking some action with the new information.

Thinking. Teachers actively described how professional development programs helped them learn content that they used in their teaching practice. For example, 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 teachers indicated that they learned the following:

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 the example above 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.

Feeling. 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. Additionally, 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. For example, consider the teacher who indicated:

. . . The programs helped me understand where other people's views are coming from and also helped me take a closer look at myself, you know, a self-reflection of looking at it and saying, you can't just decide that just because a certain district is using a certain curriculum that that's the best curriculum there is. There are so many options out there in the world that you have to really think about the curriculum that you're using. It made me really think about that and be more open to new ideas.

Teachers indicated in this study 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.

Acting. 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 in their classroom 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:

. . . we just got DI'ed (direct instruction) in our school, which was a major curriculum issue. We've mostly been talking a lot about the mathematics investigation curriculum, so I actually got engaged in a lot of different conversations about what we're doing in the class and what's being discussed in class. So I'd say that there was a lot of cross-reference there to the program I attended. I felt the need to say something about the curriculum.

As indicated in this study, 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 and learning within teaching practice described in the previous section of this paper occurred in a particular practice context as well.

Structural frame. 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, other teachers described a more traditional bureaucratic system. In these systems, it was most often the principal and assistant principal who were in charge, and teachers felt that any changes they wanted to make had to be approved at that level. Additionally, 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.

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—especially at the middle school level—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 [the professional development program] I felt like, "Ok, how would I ever get to this?"

Human resources frame. 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 that the way they were welcomed and oriented to their school had a large impact on their willingness to use new ideas in practice. 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 or programs that socialized teachers to the profession left teachers feeling devalued, as if their role was one of “discipline and classroom management” rather than teaching.

The second factor that teachers described in the human resources frame as impacting their use of new information in practice was the role of other teachers, specifically veteran or experienced teachers. Teachers often indicated a hesitancy to talk with other teachers about new ideas or new ways of doing things, not because they felt colleagues would actively block them from implementing something new, but because of a feeling that others were not interested.

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 favourites 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 the reforms, standards, and mandates. Teachers clearly felt that the things that were 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 seemed 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, even in my school, 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 or to this new program that they're doing 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. When the external politics came along, one teacher explained, “I would just keep my head down and do what I know works in my classroom.”

Implications for Future Research Connecting Adult Education and Teacher Professional Development

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.

Current teacher professional development programs are often based on an “update model” that relies on a one-way transmission of information. It is clear from this study that teacher

professional development programs need to be based on a constructivist model that will foster the integration of knowledge, context, and teaching practice.

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