Reaching Consensus on “Best Practices” of Professional Development: A Critical Review of Literature

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Abstract

Emanating from the different perspectives and philosophies on continuing professional development (CPD), a number of types and models of teacher professional development have been developed and implemented in different countries. The goal has been to promote and support the professional development of teachers from the beginning of their careers until they retire. In this paper, I examine some of the most prominent types of Continuing Professional Development in recent literature.

Keywords: continuing professional development, professional development models

1. Introduction

A considerable body of literature has emerged on professional development, teacher learning, and teacher change in the past 50 years. The literature contains much material which includes case studies of classroom teaching, evaluations of programmes designed to improve teaching and learning, and surveys of teachers about their pre-service and in-service professional development experiences (Borko, 2004). From all of this literature, Desimone *et al* (2006) note that meaningful insights into ‘high-quality’ professional development have emerged – qualities of professional development that make it effective at increasing teachers’ knowledge and skills, changing teaching practice, and improving student achievement. In addition, there is a considerable amount of literature describing ‘best practices’ in professional development which have been developed from the experiences of experts. These practices include: a focus on content and how students learn content; in-depth, active learning opportunities; links to high standards; opportunities for teachers to engage in leadership roles; extended duration; and the collective participation of groups of teachers from the same school, grade or department (Desimone, 2002). Some studies conducted over the past decade suggest that professional development experiences that share all (or most) of these characteristics can exert a substantially positive influence on teachers’ classroom practice and student achievement. (Birman *et al* 2000 and Garet *et al* 2001). Recent research reflects a consensus that at least some of the characteristics of professional development are critical to increasing teacher knowledge and skills, and improving their practice; these in turn do a great deal to improve student achievement.

Wilson and Berne (1999) argue that, consistent with literature describing best practice, recent large-scale studies have shown that high quality professional development programmes include: (a) content focus; (b) active learning; (c) coherence; (d) duration; and (e) collective participation. Garet (2001) also includes ‘form of activity’ as one of these facets. Before explaining briefly what each entails, it is necessary to recognise that the analysis of these characteristics of professional development focuses on structural features: characteristics of the structure or design of professional development activities such as the form of activity, the duration, and the collective participation; and core features: dimensions of the substance or core of the professional development experience such as content focus, active learning and coherence.

2. Structural and Core Features of Professional Development

The form of the activity is a reform type, such as a study group or network. This is in contrast to a traditional workshop or conference. The duration of activity includes the total number of contact hours that participants spend on the activity, as well as the span of time over which the activity takes place and the degree to which the activity emphasises the collective participation of groups of teachers from the same school, department, or grade level, as opposed to the participation of individual teachers from many schools. The three characteristics that make up the substance of the professional development activity include active learning, coherence and content focus. Active learning is the extent to which the

activity offers opportunities for the teachers to become actively engaged in the meaningful analysis of teaching and learning. Active learning can take a number of forms, including observing expert teachers or the interactive feedback and discussion after being observed; reviewing student work in the topic areas covered; and leading discussions. The degree to which the activity promotes coherence in teachers' professional development, by incorporating experiences that are consistent with teachers' goals, aligned with state standards and assessments, and encourage continuing professional communication among teachers. The extent to which teacher learning is consistent with teachers' knowledge and beliefs is another important aspect of coherence. The last aspect of coherence is the degree to which the activity has content focus – that is, the degree to which the activity is focused on improving and deepening teachers' content knowledge. The latter describes the link between activities that focus on subject matter content and how students learn that content with increases in teacher knowledge and skills, improvements in practice, and, to a more limited extent, increases in student achievement (Desimone, 2009). In the following section the framing by Garet, *et al* (2001) is employed to explain in some greater detail both the structural and core features:

2.1 Form of activity

The most common type of professional development, and the form most criticised in the literature, is the workshop. A workshop is a structured approach to professional development that takes place outside of a teacher's classroom. It generally involves a leader (or leaders) with special expertise and participants who attend sessions at scheduled times – often after school, on weekends, or during the summer (Loucks-Horsley *et al* 1998:42-43). Institutes, courses, and conferences are other traditional forms of professional development that display many of the features of workshops in that they also tend to take place externally and involve a leader or leaders with special expertise and participants who attend at a specific time. This is generally a very common form of professional development in South Africa, but is widely criticised as being ineffective in providing teachers with sufficient time, activities, or the content necessary for increasing teacher's knowledge and improving their classroom practice. As a result, there is growing interest in the reform type of professional development, such as study groups or mentoring and coaching. These reform types differ from traditional professional development in several aspects. In particular, reform activities often take place during the regular school day. In fact, some reform activities, such as mentoring and coaching, take place, at least in part, during the process of classroom instruction or during the regular schedule of the teachers.

2.2 Duration

Much of the literature on teacher learning and professional development calls for professional development that is sustained over time. The duration of these development activities is important in two ways: firstly, longer activities allow in-depth discussions of content, student conceptions and misconceptions, and pedagogical strategies. Secondly, activities that extend over time allow teachers to practice their new skills in the classroom and obtain feedback on their teaching. As an example, in their Teacher Activity Survey, Garet *et al* (2001) asked the teachers about two aspects of duration: the total number of contact hours spent in the professional development activity, including all the components of the activity, and the period of time, in days, weeks, and months, over which the activity was spread. The responses to these two questions allowed the researchers to obtain a much broader sense of the role that duration plays in teacher professional development.

2.3 Collective participation

There is a growing interest in professional development that is designed for groups of teachers from the same school, department or grade level. This type offers a number of potential advantages. Firstly, teachers who work together are more likely to discuss the concepts, skills, and problems that they encounter during their professional development experiences. Secondly, teachers who are from the same school, department, or grade are likely to share common curriculum materials, course offerings, and assessment requirements. By engaging in professional development together, they may be able to integrate what they learn with other aspects of their instructional context. Thirdly, teachers who teach the same students can discuss students' needs with regard to specific classes or grades. And finally, by focusing on a group of teachers from the same school (in which some teachers may be new), professional development may help sustain changes in practice. This technique is thus one way of building sustainability into the framework of a professional development programme.

2.4 Content focus

Available research suggests that content covered during professional development activities may vary along at least four dimensions. Firstly, activities vary in the emphasis they give to the subject matter that teachers are expected to teach and the teaching methods they are expected to employ. Some activities are intended primarily to improve teachers' knowledge of subject-matter content; some are designed to improve aspects of teaching practice, such as classroom management, lesson planning, or grouping methods; and some are intended to improve their content knowledge and teaching practices in specific subjects, such as teaching multi-digit addition in elementary mathematics or forces and motion in physics. Activities also vary in the specificity of the changes to teaching practice that are encouraged. Some activities focus on helping teachers use particular curriculum materials (new textbooks, science kits, or curriculum replacement units) or prescribed teaching strategies (specific student questioning strategies). These are important aspects to build into a study of professional development.

2.5 Active learning

This core feature of professional development concerns the opportunities that the professional development activity gives teachers to become actively engaged in meaningful discussions, planning, and practices. Opportunities for active learning can take a number of forms and include the opportunity to observe expert teachers and to be observed while teaching, to plan how new curriculum materials and new teaching methods will be used in the classroom, to review student work in the subject being covered, and to lead discussions and engage in the written work. *Observation and being observed* are important elements of active learning and allow teachers to observe expert teachers or be observed in their own classroom (after which they receive feedback).

These opportunities can take a variety of forms, and include giving feedback on videotaped lessons and causing teachers to visit each other's classrooms to observe lessons. Active learning can also have activity leaders, lead teachers, mentors, and coaches observe teachers in the classroom and thereafter discuss the goals of a lesson, the tasks employed, the teaching strategies, and student learning. *Planning classroom implementation* is another element of active learning which involves linking the ideas introduced during professional development experiences to the teachers' work. The introduction of new approaches may result in different implications depending on the curriculum in place in a teacher's school, the specific textbooks used by a teacher, and the required assessments in the teacher's district. Also, the characteristics of the students in the teacher's classroom, including the material they learned in previous grades and their expectations for the classroom instruction, may affect the implementation of new teaching approaches. *Reviewing student work*, a third element of active learning, involves the examination and review of students' work. By examining students' written responses to problems, for example, teachers may gain an understanding of their assumptions, reasoning and solution strategies. Also, examining and discussing examples of students' work may assist teachers to develop skills in diagnosing student problems and designing lessons at an appropriate level of difficulty. Apart from opportunities to observe teaching, plan classroom implementation, and review student work, professional development activities may also offer teachers the opportunity to give presentations, lead discussions, and produce written work (presenting, leading and writing). Active participation of this kind may improve outcomes by permitting teachers to delve more deeply into the substantive issues that are introduced.

2.6 Coherence

A third core feature of professional development concerns the extent to which professional development activities are perceived by teachers to be a part of a coherent programme of teacher learning. As mentioned, professional development is frequently criticised on the ground that the activities are disconnected from one another and thus do not form part of a coherent programme of teacher learning and development. A professional development activity is more likely to be effective in improving teachers' knowledge and skills if it forms part of a wider set of activities.

Given the number, quality, and diversity of studies that provide support for the features of professional development, Desimone (2009) concludes that a consensus has been reached that these core features play an important role in determining the effectiveness of professional development. There is an emerging agreement that they are the "features of professional development worth testing", and as such, they should be included in impact studies of professional development (Wayne *et al* 2008:472). Their systematic inclusion in effectiveness studies will allow researchers to take the next step in understanding the importance of these features in improving student achievement (Wayne *et al* 2008).

Research on teacher learning has also consistently shown the usefulness of focusing on measuring the features of learning rather than the structure of activity (Wayne *et al* 2008; Desimone, 2009; Porter *et al* 2002; Garet *et al* 2001). Desimone (2009) argues that "there is enough empirical evidence to suggest that there is in fact a consensus on a core set of features". Very recent studies are already including this set of core features as critical components of effective professional development (Johnson, Kahle, and Fargo, 2007). In her example, Desimone (2009) speaks about education policy documents that have begun to reflect this consensus on critical features of professional development. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 in the United States of America (USA) describes "high-quality" professional development as activities that "improve and increase teachers' knowledge of the academic subjects the teachers teach (content focus) and that are... sustained [and] intensive" (duration) and that are "are aligned with, and directly related to state academic content standards, student academic achievement standards, and assessments" (coherence). Desimone goes on to discuss the Teaching Commission (2004) report entitled *Teaching at Risk: A Call to Action* that also emphasises coherence (alignment) and collective participation (collaboration):

Professional development should be aligned with state and district goals and standards for student learning... and should involve opportunities for collaboration so that teachers can learn from each other (p.49).

The core features of professional development activities (content knowledge; opportunities for active learning; and coherence with other learning activities) could be expected to exert a significantly positive effect on teachers' knowledge, skills and classroom practice. It is primarily through these core features that the following structural features significantly affect teacher learning: (a) the form of the activity (workshops or study groups); (b) collective participation of teachers from the same school, grade, or subject and (c) the duration of the activity (Garet *et al* 2001). Desimone *et al* (2009) found that the six features of professional development, discussed earlier, were related to the increase in teachers' knowledge, skills and changes in teaching practice as reported by the teachers themselves. The core features (content focus, active learning and coherence) worked through the structural features (active learning, duration, and collective participation). Thus, reform-type activities such as study groups or mentoring and coaching, in contrast to a traditional workshops or conferences, were more likely to exhibit collective participation and a longer duration; activities with collective participation and a longer duration were more likely to have active learning opportunities, coherence and content focus and these activities in turn were influential in how successfully the experience improved knowledge, skills and teaching practice.

According to Desimone (2009), there are at least two central components of a conceptual framework for studying teachers' professional development. One is recognising a set of critical features that define effective professional development, as discussed above, and the second is establishing an operational theory of how professional development improves teacher and student outcomes. The model represents interactive, non-recursive relationships between the critical features of professional development, teacher knowledge and beliefs, classroom practice, and student outcomes. As listed below, a core theory of action for professional development would most likely follow these steps:

1. Teachers experience effective professional development.
2. The professional development increases teachers' knowledge and skills and/or changes their attitudes and beliefs.
3. Teachers use their knowledge and skills, attitudes, and beliefs to improve their instruction or their approach to pedagogy, or both.
4. The new instructional practices result in increased student learning.

What attracts teachers to professional development is the belief that it will expand their knowledge and skills, contribute to their growth, and improve their teaching (Gusky, 2002). Many professional development programmes fail to consider the process of teacher change, although activities are frequently designed to alter teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions. Professional development leaders, for example, often attempt to modify teachers' beliefs about certain aspects of teaching or the desirability of a particular curriculum or instructional innovation. They presume that these changes will lead to specific changes in their classroom behaviours and practices, which in turn will result in improved student learning. In agreement with this view, Desimone (2009) notes that this is the framework that suggests a sequence of events-from learning activities to changes in knowledge, beliefs and attitudes, to changes in practice, to student improvements, as a result it could serve as a guide for when to measure what. This model allows for the testing of both a theory of teacher change (that professional development alters teacher knowledge, beliefs, and practice) and a theory of instruction (that changed practice influences student achievement), both of which are necessary to enhance our understanding of how professional development works (Wayne *et al* 2008). Studies that are designed to test both a theory of instruction and theory of teacher change have more potential to improve our understanding of how to design professional development that improves practice.

3. Conclusion

This review was done based on the fact that many teachers are not satisfied with the professional development that is offered to them. As Mokhele and Jita 2013 argue, there is consensus that many continuing professional development programmes have yet to understand professional development from teachers' perspectives. These researchers further suggest that such perspectives will enable one to understand what drives teachers to enlist in these programmes and how such programmes make a difference to them and their classrooms. In her research Mokhele (2013) concludes that teachers should not only be involved in the planning of the CPD programmes, but that the programmes should be aligned with their own personal circumstances and motivations. As a result, to make informed policy and programme decisions regarding teacher professional development, district and school leaders need to know whether professional development programmes are currently reaching the teachers who need them most, Mokhele (2014).

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