

## Chapter 13

# Teacher Self-Directed Learning: Further Insights

**Abstract** This chapter reiterates the benefits of in-service education opportunities that actively position teachers as self-directed learners. Creating the conditions for such learning is a worthwhile and productive pursuit which requires teachers and facilitators to invest a high level of intellectual engagement as they find ways to think and work differently. The professional knowledge which emerges from the experience should be valued at both a school and sector level. Realizing this type of teacher learning is possible, to do so requires professional learning to be less about the construction of a ‘programme’ and more about conceptualizing a process of learning.

This study has revealed that teacher self-directed learning is possible when teachers are actively positioned by specific conditions for learning. The teachers engaged in various degrees of intellectual rigour as each struggled with decisions about how to determine the value of new ideas, position ideas within current practice, recognise the interconnectedness of contexts and practice and articulate personal principles of action. In so doing, participants confronted the problematic nature of practice and recognized that through the many dilemmas they consistently confronted and managed, they made judgements about that which they considered to be appropriate action in response to the varying pedagogical situations they experienced.

Three overarching analytic categories helped to explain the nature of teacher self-directed learning; these included:

Category 1: Self-efficacy that essentially involved teachers working to build a sense of professional identity.

Category 2: Aligning reasoning and action required teachers to reflect on their professional reasoning to clarify personal principles of practice and use this information to identify tensions between these principles and their existing actions.

Category 3: Valuing emerging expertise required teachers to realign their action with their professional thinking and also share new professional knowledge.

As the participating teachers attended to these considerations, their level of intellectual engagement appeared to deepen. Their conversations moved from initial concerns around the technical aspects of practice to more complex interconnections between the realities of their work context and how that shaped their thinking and

the options they chose to explore and implement in their practice. Teacher talk began to reveal insights about personal learning, articulating the thinking that characterized their learning.

If professional learning is to be meaningful, then it must enable teachers to realise the importance of their professional thinking, in particular the value of their ideas about effective practice. It must also support teachers to understand the continually changing interplay of contextual dynamics that is their teaching reality. Professional learning of this nature builds teacher belief and confidence in personal ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behaviour and teaching practice and, in doing so, helps to develop a deeper understanding of change as a necessary professional response to contextual demands.

When teachers are supported to articulate their professional reasoning, notice what they are attending to and align reasoning with professional action, then they develop meaningful and contextually relevant approaches to their practice. Self-directed professional learning is productive because it supports teachers to experience the complexity of this process and enables them to accept that meaningful change takes time and is dependent upon a level of expertise that grows from personal knowledge of practice. Self-directed learning creates conditions which allow teachers to convey a deep understanding about the conditions necessary to produce effective educational change and display a capacity for professional decision making and a high level of professional awareness about the relationship between professional thinking and practice.

## **Moving Forward: A Summary**

The categories of description used to characterise teacher self-directed learning demonstrate that it is possible to develop new ways of talking about and identifying teacher learning. These categories pay attention to how teachers seek to make sense of information and experiences when professional learning is genuinely grasped and there is a shift beyond PD as a form of programme construction and delivery. The experience of self-directed professional learning allowed and supported teachers to be aware of what they were attending to as they developed meaningful and contextually relevant approaches to their practice. Teachers clearly understand that teaching involves many competing demands which challenge the notion of one way of doing teaching, pushing back against simplistic and/or transmissive views of practice. Under the conditions of the *LSiS* programme, teachers demonstrated a capacity to make decisions about a number of key issues for their own learning and to notice and attend to their professional practice in new ways.

Teachers have the capacity to intellectually engage in learning experiences that focus less on the activities of teaching and more on understanding the complex relationship between the problematic nature of teaching, professional thinking and action. The insights teachers could potentially develop about their professional knowledge from engaging in such an approach to professional learning could be

used to enhance practice at an overall school level and potentially could enable teachers to experience meaningful professional growth. Unfortunately teachers are rarely given opportunities to engage in such professional learning and rarely have the chance to explore such possibilities for their own learning.

A number of 'traditional' cultural assumptions about teacher professional learning need to be reconsidered, in particular 'accepted' thinking about the purpose and nature of existing in-service teacher education. Professional learning needs to be less about the construction of a 'programme' and more about conceptualizing a process of learning. When designing in-service opportunities, there must be an explicit focus on professional learning rather than professional development matters; more so, it is important to ensure that all operational features align with the theoretical intention to actively recognize, value and attend to the centrality of teachers as active participants and their context in terms of planning, learning and action. Operational features actively contribute to pedagogical intent and so require ongoing scrutiny and assessment.

The facilitator role in professional learning that is designed to enhance teacher decision making and ultimately self-directed learning needs to actively position teachers as 'best placed' to determine their own contextually relevant responses rather than be directed by an external expert with a generalized 'one-size-fits-all' solution. Facilitators need to work more closely with teachers and schools so that the connections between context and personal learning can be meaningfully developed. Therefore a willing investment in the development of new skills and expertise to enhance teacher learning is needed.

Teachers themselves must also play a different role in their own professional learning and be prepared to invest time and intellectual and behavioural engagement in order to develop a deeper understanding of their professional practice and to recognize and value the rich and valuable context for personal learning. When such an approach to learning is recognized and grasped, it is also valued as an investment in growth that is both personally and professionally rewarding.

It is also essential that education systems, sectors and schools find ways to actively value the ideas teachers develop about contextually relevant and meaningful school-based change. This knowledge potentially serves student needs and therefore finding ways to actively create conditions that support the explication of teachers' professional practice – in fact, it should be a high priority.

The implications of changing both the purpose and the intention of in-service teacher education cannot be understated for teachers, schools, sectors and education systems more broadly. The school context needs to become meaningfully connected and interwoven with each teacher's professional learning to encourage and enable teachers to grasp the importance of individual learning and also influence the nature of collective professional growth through shared knowledge development. Systems as a whole must find ways to not only build teacher capacity and expertise but also actively share the resulting professional knowledge so that teachers can productively contribute to the overall educational discourse of teaching and learning. This study has demonstrated what might be possible when teachers are empowered to own and develop their professional knowledge; now that we know how to tap this potential, there is no going back.