

Chapter 3

PD and PL: Navigating the Divide

Abstract This chapter outlines the conceptual framework underpinning this research and pays particular attention to the theoretical difference between professional development and professional learning. A theoretical dichotomy is used as a rhetorical device to explain these differing positions. This chapter explains that common approaches to professional development tend to reflect assumptions about the nature of teacher learning, where teachers are actively positioned to be passive recipients of external expertise. Alternative assumptions acknowledge teachers' capacity to become active decision makers about personal learning, actively seeking to place teachers and their context, as central to the learning experience. Such assumptions, it is argued, capture the intention of that which comprises the notion of professional learning.

Introduction

In designing a study to identify the conditions that enhanced meaningful teacher learning, it became necessary to develop a conceptual framework that explicitly outlined the theoretical difference between professional development and professional learning. To clearly convey the thinking that underpinned this work, a theoretical dichotomy is used as a rhetorical device to explain these differing positions. Common approaches to professional development tend to reflect assumptions about the nature of teacher learning that position teachers as passive recipients of external expertise. Alternative assumptions acknowledge teachers' capacity to become active decision makers about personal learning and this thinking places teachers, and their context, as central to the learning experience. Such assumptions more purposefully capture the intention of that which comprises the notion of professional learning.

Positioning Teachers as Active Learners

It could well be argued that professional development (PD) characteristically views teacher learning as a dissemination activity, positioning teachers as passive recipients of information about teaching and learning (Korthagen 2001; Wilson and Berne 1999). Programmes and learning experiences of this nature are typically designed to

engineer educational change by positioning teachers as needing to be improved or developed – ‘objects rather than subjects of change’ (Ovens 2006, p. 280). PD also tends to privilege formal (Fenstermacher 1994) or public codified knowledge of teaching over teachers’ knowledge of practice, thus tacitly suggesting that those outside of teaching are best placed to decide what teachers need to do to improve their practice and enhance student learning.

In contrast, professional learning (PL) can be viewed as recognizing the central place of teachers and their context in planning, learning and action thus theoretically working to position teachers themselves as owners and key decision makers in their own professional processes of learning. PL can therefore be seen as being based on an assumption that teachers have the capacity to understand and enhance their professional practice when they are supported to critically explore their professional experiences, articulate personal learning needs and recognize the level of expertise and professional knowledge they bring to the learning situation – particularly so in relation to the contextual nature of their teaching situation.

PL situates learning as an individual experience – personal and unique for each teacher and aims to make explicit the embedded beliefs and values that are often tacit in a teacher’s practice. Therefore, PL values teachers’ professional knowledge of practice at both an individual and collective level.

Through this dichotomy (PD vs. PL), the stereotype developed is one through which PD and PL are based on very different assumptions about the source and subsequent value of knowledge for practice and the role of the teacher in the development and use of that knowledge. It could be expected then that such differing perspectives would produce disparate professional practice, yet in reality distinctions in practice are often vague, perhaps because (unfortunately) in many cases, PL has simply rebranded traditional approaches with the label more a marker of intent rather than an assurance of distinguishable practice. Yet it has been well noted that meaningful teacher learning relies on the individual teacher seeing a need to think and work differently, and this can be a very challenging experience.

The relationship between teacher thinking and action is not a linear process; it can be nuanced, unsteady, surprising and arbitrary. To genuinely support teacher learning, the associated professional practice must effectively attend to the inherent diversity of teachers’ contexts and learning needs. Considering the assumptions outlined above, this then presents a challenge for the practice of traditional PD as it can be characterized as following a predetermined and linear approach to programme development. On the other hand, PL acknowledges the need to provide flexible and supportive conditions for learning – and teachers see value in such a process. However, the ‘blurry’ use of PL in literature illustrates that, when faced with the diversity of learning needs and teaching contexts of participants in PL programmes, there is an almost unstoppable programme reversion to approaches that focus more on control and management and less on building teacher capacity for individual learning. It is not surprising then that research is needed to shine a light on why there are difficulties with translating PL into action that genuinely attends to that which matters to teachers in their experience as learners. So what are the actions

that would characterize and distinguish PL as effective, teacher-centred in-service education?

Brookfield (1995) advocated the need for assumption hunting to determine the thinking that drives professional practice in relation to teacher learning, and as this chapter will make clear, such a process is important in exposing the drivers that create tensions between the rhetoric of PL and the practice in action.

Exposing Assumptions

The study framed around the *LSiS* programme worked from a perspective of critical reflection as a means of understanding how ‘taken-for-granted’ beliefs are embedded within, give meaning to and determine the routines which characterize teacher in-service education. These routines will be interrogated to develop a deeper understanding about ‘the conditions under which processes can be changed’ (Brookfield 1995, p. 3). Assumption hunting requires a critical stance to noticing existing trends in practice in order to expose the more deeply embedded prescriptive and paradigmatic assumptions (p. 3) that drive such action.

Of particular interest in this study were the assumptions concerning professional expertise, the ownership of learning intentions and the nature of teacher learning – the central tenets of PL. In the following sections, one way of more formally differentiating between PD and PL is explored, that is, through the use of assumptions and the impact they have on practice and teacher learning. These assumptions are boldly stated as a way of ensuring the rhetorical device of the dichotomy has real effect on the nature of the associated characterization. The structure of the following sections offers an accepted routine, followed by a paradigmatic assumption with an outline of the impact of that assumption on the conditions for teacher learning, then a brief account of the emerging tension inherent in the assumption in practice followed by an alternative assumption and its impact on the conditions for teacher learning.

Existing Assumptions About Professional Expertise

Accepted Routines In-service teacher education programmes are largely designed and implemented by those outside of teaching. Teachers do not have input into decisions regarding content, learning experiences and valued learning outcomes.

Paradigmatic Assumption Professional expertise is derived not from knowledge of practice but through the development of formal or public codified knowledge of teaching. Such knowledge is developed using accepted scientific methods; it is reliable and communicated publically. Such expertise is best placed to determine educational change.

The impact of this paradigmatic assumption on the conditions for teacher learning include:

- control of decisions about educational change is placed in the hands of those external to teaching;
- in-service programme practice rarely acknowledges or attends to teachers' knowledge of practice as a valuable component of professional expertise;
- opportunities for teachers to generate and share professional knowledge that contributes to improving practice are limited; and,
- teachers are disenfranchised from the discourse of schooling.

Emerging Tension As outlined in the previous chapter, even within the prevailing political imperatives of improved student learning outcomes, educational conformity and an increased desire to politically mandate the nature of practice, individual teachers ultimately determine changes in teaching.

Teacher in-service education, which rarely acknowledges or explores teacher professional expertise, denies the active role teachers play as decision makers in educational change. Instead, teacher development programmes tend to be created as a way of ensuring (or at least attempting to ensure) the implementation of external initiatives. Teachers are positioned as passive learners, i.e. the recipients of knowledge that they should use.

Alternative Assumption Teachers are agents of educational change. The most effective and valuable educational change is informed not only by formal or public codified knowledge but also by teachers' professional knowledge of practice (which is highly valued).

The potential impact of this alternative assumption on the conditions for teacher learning include:

- the design of learning experiences and any professional support aims to assist teachers in recognizing their professional expertise so that they are able to determine and enact effective educational improvement;
- learning structures are designed to support teachers to find their voice and value themselves as experts or, as Munby and Russell (1994) described it, to recognize and respond to the 'authority of their own experience';
- conditions for learning are designed to encourage and actively seek insights into preferred action and outcomes from teachers themselves; and,
- programme practices purposefully attend to teachers, not as objects of learning but as the directors of the processes that enhance learning and ultimately produce educational change.

Existing Assumptions About the Ownership of Learning

Accepted Routines Standardised expectations of teacher learning and practice. Those outside of teaching determine that which is deemed as 'valued learning'.

Paradigmatic Assumption Teachers can be developed through the expertise of others; teacher learning is a passive rather than active experience.

The impact of this paradigmatic assumption on the conditions for teacher learning include:

- the prevailing political agenda determines teachers' learning needs;
- learning tends to be disconnected from the contextual reality of a teacher's professional context;
- teachers are marginalised from decisions about what matters in their own learning;
- teachers are positioned as passive recipients of information; and,
- programme practices focus on content delivery.

Emerging Tension Change in education is a complex process, and teachers need support to navigate their way through the many intellectual and contextual dilemmas that emerge as they reshape their practice. Tensions arise when approaches that purport to support individual learning intentions fail in practice. When teachers are distanced from such decisions, a personally meaningful purpose for professional learning is not established – largely through a disregard for the importance of a personal imperative leading to a lack of alignment with the outcomes intended by the programme designers. Such practice has been described as 'spray-on' (Mockler 2005), 'drive-by' (Senge et al. 2012) and 'hit-and-run' (Loucks-Horsley 1987) professional development (PD).

Alternative Assumption Teachers have the capacity to engage as active professionals capable of determining their own individual learning needs, thereby diversifying the intentions and outcomes of professional learning.

The potential impact of this alternative assumption on the conditions for teacher learning include:

- programme practices attempt to ensure learning conditions support teachers in identifying and developing learning objectives that are personally meaningful;
- programme practices involve active collaboration between facilitators and teachers so that teachers are engaged in decisions about their own professional learning;
- teachers articulate and work towards an individual purpose for learning;
- programme design and support works to attend to teachers' learning needs in ways that acknowledge their capacity to determine that which is contextually relevant for their teaching experience; and,
- the process of learning is personalised.

Existing Assumptions About the Nature of Learning

Accepted Routines Programmes sequentially disseminate generalised information to teachers about classroom strategies and activities.

Paradigmatic Assumption Teacher learning is linear and unproblematic because teaching is essentially a technical activity.

The impact of this paradigmatic assumption on the conditions for teacher learning include:

- the complexity and contextual nature of teaching and learning is underestimated; and,
- teachers experience a ‘one-size-fits-all approach’ to both teaching and their teacher learning.

Emerging Tension Teacher learning is complex and changing, yet programmes operate under the assumption that learning is about transmission, and routinely, predetermined programmes, sequenced formats and modular programme designs prevail as persistent and accepted approaches to programme organization and structure. The persistence of an underlying assumption that teacher learning can be managed as a simple, straightforward process of information delivery is ever present. Yet such approaches do not address the complexities that teachers face each day in their classrooms as they deal with a wide range of contextually relevant issues and dilemmas. As a consequence, such limited approaches simply do not work.

Alternative Assumption Meaningful teacher learning is a collective, interactive professional experience, supported by conditions, which provide flexible assistance designed to address individual learning needs.

The potential impact of this alternative assumption on the conditions for teacher learning include:

- learning experiences are designed to cater for individual experience and utilise the group experience to ensure that learning is a collective, interactive professional experience;
- teachers are supported to use their professional knowledge, their own pedagogical reasoning about what matters for their teaching. They are empowered to make decisions about what matters for their practice and determining how they will apply information;
- conditions are designed to build professional relationships and provide opportunities for critical conversations with colleagues;
- experiences are in themselves fluid and responsive to arising learning needs;
- opportunities are provided for sustained learning, collective participation, the effective application of new ideas in practice and the overall coherence of professional development activities linked to teachers’ other experiences; and,
- support aligns with a teacher’s personal purpose for learning rather than a one-size-fits-all approach to teacher learning.

Developing a Conceptual Framework to Actively Position Teachers as Learners

Figures 3.1 and 3.2 (below) represent two differing views which shape, and appear to determine, programme practice for in-service teacher education. Figure 3.1 signifies what might be described as a traditional PD view based on the assumptions (outlined above) that underpin some approaches to current practice. In this model, the determinants of programme design, content and learning outcomes largely reside with those external to the practice of school-based teaching. The resultant conditions tend to marginalize teachers from decision making and position them as anonymous participants within a mechanical process of professional development.

Figure 3.2 represents an alternative view and is the framework that informs this study.

Figure 3.2 portrays personalized teacher learning based on empowering teachers as self-directed learners. In this framework, teachers are central to the learning process, determining the experience of learning and ultimately the learning outcomes and the impact of those outcomes on their personal practice. In this second model, teachers are positioned as professionals who are committed to personal learning that further develops their professional expertise, i.e. their capacity to determine and lead meaningful school-based change.

The use of the dichotomy heightens the tensions between these two frames (Figs. 3.1 and 3.2) but is important in bringing the differences into stark contrast. Identifying the types of changes needed to facilitate a shift from the first to the second frame requires accepting the need for new assumptions about teacher learning (as outlined above). Investigating self-directed teacher learning is dependent upon

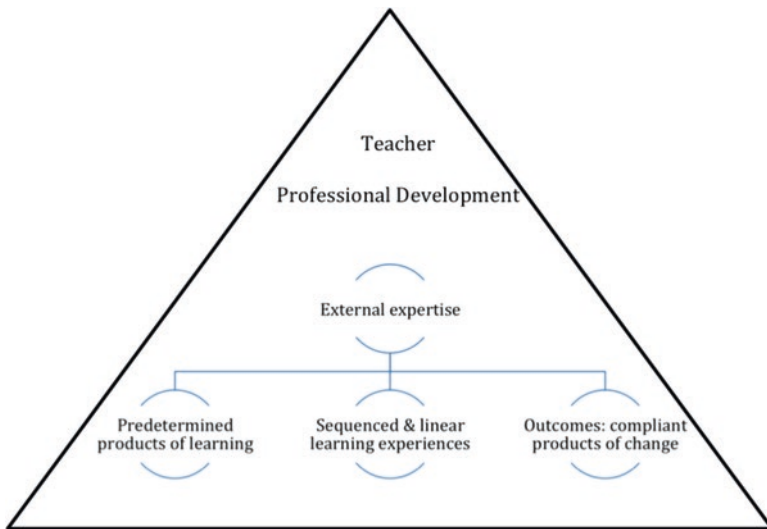


Fig. 3.1 ‘Traditional’ approach to teacher professional development (PD)

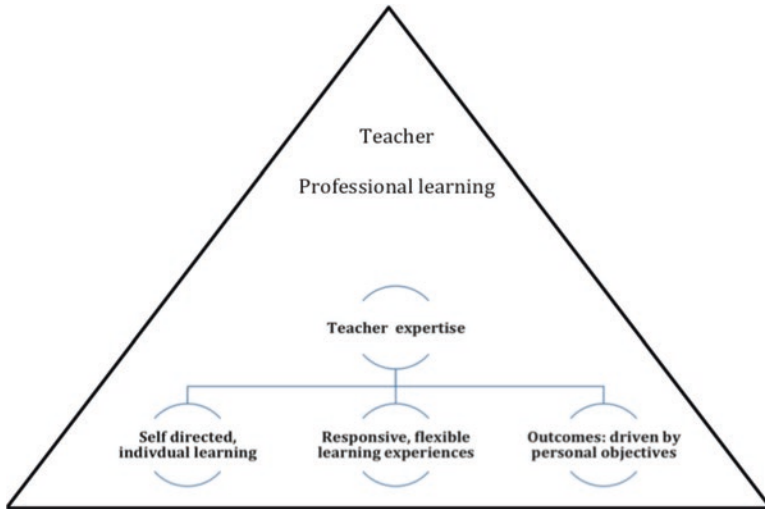


Fig. 3.2 An alternative approach to teacher professional learning (PL)

the willingness of educational sectors to move away from predetermined activity-based professional development programmes in order to better mobilise supportive formats that are genuinely useful for teachers' learning.

This study is based on understanding the development of teachers' professional learning through the conceptual framework outlined in Fig. 3.2.

Summary

The conceptual framework underpinning this study paid particular attention to the theoretical difference between professional development and professional learning. Identifying the types of changes needed to facilitate a shift from PD to PL is about accepting the need for a range of new assumptions about the nature and ownership of teacher learning and the role and value of teachers' knowledge of practice in teacher education.

How this study was developed is described in the following chapter. The information illustrates how researching this conceptual framework might better inform approaches to, and understanding of, teachers' professional learning.