



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Taylor, A;Thompson, P

Title:

Professional Learning for Teachers in a Period of Crisis

Date:

2020-12-17

Citation:

Taylor, A. & Thompson, P. (2020). Professional Learning for Teachers in a Period of Crisis. *Leading and Managing*, 26 (2), pp.51-59

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/291987>

Professional Learning for Teachers in a Period of Crisis

ADAM TAYLOR

Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne

Email: adam.taylor1@unimelb.edu.au

PAULINE THOMPSON

Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne

Email: pauline.thompson@unimelb.edu.au

ABSTRACT: Professional learning is acknowledged as key to improving teaching practice. The great disruption to educational continuity induced by the COVID-19 pandemic required a rapid shift from face-to-face learning to a learning-from-home model and thus required teachers to change their practice. In 'normal' times, carefully planned professional learning would be a key element to support changes in teaching practice. However, in the 'new normal' this time was not available and professional learning for teachers was evident in quite different formats and forms. Drawing on the notes taken from meetings with the leaders of learning within a national network of more than 50 non-government school leaders as they navigated their way through this new space, we sought to develop an understanding of the extent to which the key elements of effective professional learning were evident in the professional learning available to teachers during this time. What has become clear is that teachers have been willing to make rapid and radical changes to their teaching practice and that professional learning was key to supporting teachers to successfully make these changes.

Introduction

The great disruption to educational continuity induced by the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a unique opportunity to observe a rapid and radical shift in teacher practice. The shift in pedagogical and learning paradigms induced by schools having to move from face-to-face, on-campus learning to a learning-from-home model, over a period of just a few days, has been – to use the word which must surely be the 2020 word of the year – unprecedented. The usual barriers to professional learning of time and resources (Buczynski & Hansen, 2010) were swept aside in the face of desperate urgency.

Over the past three months, there has been much discussion and debate in the media about the impact of learning from home has had on students. We have had the opportunity to talk directly with many school leaders and teachers from all around Australia and to hear stories from

the ‘frontline’. These conversations have enabled us to make observations about the lived reality for school leaders and teachers as they have navigated their way through this new space. What was clear from these discussions is that the narrative changed and moved quickly from operational matters to how to best support student learning during this time. In this article we will reflect on teacher professional learning during this time and offer our observations on the lived reality for school leaders and teachers as they have navigated their way through this new space.

In this article the focus will be on the following question:

To what extent are the key features of effective professional learning evident as schools supported teachers to make a change in practice in response to the learning-from-home model introduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Method

A secondary analysis of deidentified meeting notes is the data source for this article. The meetings took place with leaders of learning within a national network of more than 50 non-government schools. There were four meetings held to discuss the impact ‘learning from home’ had on the teaching and learning in each of the schools, with each school represented by one person. In addition to the meetings with leaders of learning, meetings took place with Principals and Deputy Principals to discuss learning continuity plans during the period of COVID-19 school interruption between April and May 2020. In total, more than 100 participants took part, on multiple occasions, totalling over 18 hours of discussion. The deidentified meeting notes were analysed in order to identify key themes. The governing body of the network of schools has given permission for the deidentified meeting notes to be analysed in order for key learnings to be shared with the wider educational community.

The methodology used is representational analysis, built on the understanding that interaction and context are constituent elements of teachers’ meaning-making. In representational analysis, ‘the analyst must infer the general meaning of the narrative based on cues with the aid of her/his own knowledge of the context’ (Husu, 2005, p. 122). Our representational analysis offers a holistic interpretation of the numerous narrative sprites that punctuated the conversations, rather than granular analysis of individual pieces of narrative data.

Discussion

Beyond the operational training dimensions of professional learning, teachers have recently been challenged in the substantive matters of the pedagogical style and the learning framework which inhere their face-to-face teaching approach. Berliner (2004) notes that teachers tend to develop expertise in the first seven years of their career, but thereafter, their quality as a teacher stabilises, and incremental improvement becomes problematic. That is to say, into their second career decade, teachers go on to become more experienced, but not necessarily more expert. If, at the same time, we accept Groundwater-Smith & Mockler’s (2009) argument for a focus on

professional learning as the ongoing career-long process of teachers honing their *expertise*, it becomes clearer why so many professional learning attempts fail to shift teachers' practice and entrenched mindsets (Robinson et al., 2017).

The shift in teacher practice which the COVID-19 pandemic initiated required schools to develop professional learning teams to meet the immediate need to skill teachers up to the level required to teach in ways that allowed students to learn-from-home (Doucet et al., 2020). What we have learned so far is that the elements of the Iterative Model of Professional Learning (IMPL) (Thompson, Kriewaldt & Redman, 2020) have been evident in schools' efforts to conduct effective professional learning programs for teachers.

IMPL is predicated on an understanding that there are five effective elements of effective professional learning programs, that is they should:

1. build trusting, professional relationships;
2. have a foundation of subject matter that is worthy, relevant and accessible;
3. be of sustained duration;
4. provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice; and
5. be personalised to support the individual learning needs of teachers.

The five characteristics of effective professional learning programs enumerated above have each been observed by leaders of learning and shared in our teleconference discussions with them. Each of these characteristics is discussed below.

Building trusting professional relationships

Intensive levels of professional learning accompanied the move to learning from home. This has been done with a huge degree of goodwill and cooperation from teachers and other school staff in the face of sometimes enormous difficulty (Wilson & Mude, 2020). While some teachers had a high degree of readiness to move into a mode of learning that relied heavily on technology because of their existing practice, many did not. In the crisis, however, nobody had a choice but to take on new learnings if they were to effectively teach young people without being face-to-face. For many teachers, they had to acknowledge the need to acquire knowledge and skills in a situation that was at the same time a best-case and a worst-case scenario. Best case because there was a very high level of readiness for just-in-time learning; worst case over and over, teachers had to make themselves vulnerable before their colleagues.

It has been said more than once in the current disruption that 'we are all in this together' (Guterres, 2020). This equalising playing field has created a safe environment, essential for effective teacher professional engagement and learning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The resultant environment of high levels of relational trust and collegiality has resulted in one of the most significant factors for the improvement in student outcomes – teachers' collective efficacy (Hattie & Zierer, 2017). This collective efficacy has mitigated teachers' vulnerability, enabling the higher levels of persistence required to open teachers up to new pedagogies (Donohoo, 2016).

Without the agility of face-to-face teaching, teachers working remotely with students have had to work harder to check for student understanding. Put simply, teaching online is exhausting. Teachers changed their practice in ways they would not have done in ‘normal’ circumstances, willing to have a go at something even though it might not work. They were not failing but learning together, working in teams to get through the workload. With this development has come high levels of collegiality and the related professional learning.

Whilst teacher professional learning is most frequently conceived in terms of formal programs, it should also be seen to occur informally through the professional conversations that teachers have (Dinham, 2016), as they work together to solve new conundrums. Teachers have had to shift from a paradigm of face-to-face teaching that they have used for the entirety of their professional lives to a new one where they are forced to teach students remotely.

The first week of learning from home led to huge disruption to families, as amusingly depicted in ABC Radio’s National *Corona Tales* (Pepper, 2020). Many schools sought feedback from students and families, immediately implementing changes based on what they heard. Parents have largely responded very positively to the reciprocal relationship that has been nurtured by schools, improving the chances of learning success through communication that has allowed parents to engage appropriately with their children’s learning in constructive ways. Teachers in alternative school settings have built positive relationships built with students and their families through the regular contact accompanying delivery of paper-based learning packs (Masters et al., 2020) (often with a meal for the family) and the innovative use of social media to maintain engagement (Hattie, 2020). This has provided an opportunity to forge relationships with young people and families. In the research base, such approaches to the building of home-school relationship in difficult times correlate to better learning outcomes (AITSL, 2020; Jeynes, 2017).

Hattie and Zierer (2017) note that teachers’ collective efficacy ‘screams for leadership in the school’ (p. 26). Strong leadership is precisely what teachers received in the move to remote learning, as evidenced by the very strong (80%) sense of support from colleagues and school leadership that New South Wales (NSW) government school teachers reported in a recent post-initial-lockdown survey (Wilson & Mude, 2020). School leaders’ provision of a relatively well-planned transition from school to home learning provided the orderly and safe environment that is the bedrock of trust in learning leaders (Robinson & Gray, 2019).

Have a foundation of subject matter that is worthy, relevant and accessible

Effective professional learning needs to be relevant to the local context (Kennedy, 2016) and linked to the teachers’ own students’ work if it is to support improvements in teaching practice (Greenleaf et al., 2011). This point was particularly relevant in the shift to on-line learning. The teachers had a strong motivation to enhance their skills in areas such as information technology as these skills were essential for them to deliver their lessons. Experienced teachers shifted their pedagogy – willingly – learning new skills so that they could teach their students. Remote learning brought new challenges for staff training, like new dimensions of child protection. Documents on the child safeguarding of young people in a learning-from-home paradigm have been published by various educational authorities around Australia. While these essential documents express the need for more operational training elements of teacher professional

learning, they have, nonetheless, been important opportunities for teachers to have impressed upon them in lasting ways the importance of wellbeing as a fundamental precondition for learning.

Seemingly liberated of the demands of an overreliance of summative assessments, many teachers have apparently relished the opportunity to learn new skills in the delivery of the content of their subject areas. The teachers and leaders we spoke to reported being able to engage students in learning tasks in ways that had not been attempted before. This was particularly evident for teachers in subjects where students usually are engaged in practical activities such as technology or physical education. The teachers in these subjects made changes to how they presented the lessons to the students and worked with students to align the content with their home environment. We heard of teachers designing activities in which a family member becomes a 'client' for a technology project and the students being highly motivated and engaged in their real-life learning project. Dinham (2016) refers to this process of teachers being willing and open to change their practice in response to an observed need as adaptive expertise. This aligns closely with the research of Baeher and Kung (2011) and Loucks-Horsley et al. (2009) who report that when a teacher becomes aware of the impact of their practice this becomes a strong impetus for change.

Be of sustained duration

Duration is an important element of teacher professional learning (Stoll, 2010). Time given to allow for new learnings to be incorporated fully into ongoing practice is essential if impact is to be sustained (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). Finding themselves on unfamiliar ground, school leaders have not necessarily been sure of how to shift the paradigms of learning and teaching in ways that maximise learning continuity for the students. In this environment, schools have turned to parents and students to gauge the success or otherwise of the implementation of the early iterations of learning-from-home. This has allowed them to identify and better respond to the learning needs of their students.

As they reflect on their efforts, school leaders will question what they can harness and harvest from the new mode of learning which they and their students have faced. It is reasonable to anticipate that teacher practice in the post-pandemic age will have captured, and will continue, the nexus between digital technology and pedagogy. There is almost built-into the current shift in pedagogical practice an assumption that teaching and learning will result in a 'new normal' when schools fully return to on-campus learning for every student.

A common view expressed by teachers, and the staff that support them in schools, is that their greatest professional anxiety is the learning gaps they see emerging for their students (Buckley Flack et al., 2020). While all jurisdictions have now brought students back to school, they continue to be concerned about impact on learning for some that the disruption to previous modes of learning has caused. In any crisis, inequalities are accentuated, and the rapid shift to learning-from-home has been no different. Very young learners, vocationally oriented senior secondary students, boarding students from remote communities, for example, join more readily recognised disadvantaged student groups as needing of special attention (Clinton, 2020; Drane, Vernon, & O'Shea, 2020; Lamb et al., 2020). Strategising how to assist these groups of students

whose learning has been compromised by their disconnection from face-to-face teaching will occupy teachers' thinking for at least the remainder of this school year. Clinton (2020) also notes that there is a concern that the current pandemic will inevitably create the opportunity for the disengaged students to drop out of school or resist returning to school.

Professional learning in such an environment is focused on an improvement in pedagogy and collaboration, as it should be, rather than on jumping through hoops for standards accreditation (Appel, 2019; Taylor, 2016). Together, these factors suggest that the current reflection on pedagogy will be of a sustained duration and thus more likely to result in a period of professional learning which will have lasting impact.

Provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice

Reflection on practice is a precursor to teachers changing their beliefs, leading to permanent shifts in their pedagogy (Darling-Hammond, Hylar & Gardner, 2017; Thompson, Kriewaldt & Redman, 2020). At a systemic level, educational authorities throughout Australia acted quickly to frame the set of reflective questions which school leaders needed to ask themselves in order to set up their students and their teachers for success. School leaders were drawn to reflect on their current mode of delivery, the digital learning platforms which they had in place to support learning, the dominant pedagogies exercised by their teachers, and the preparedness of their students to learn in an environment where their ability to learn autonomously (but not in isolation) would be tested. Without the agility which face-to-face teaching provides, schools quickly came to appreciate just how well (or poorly) their students had been prepared in 'learning how to learn'.

Teachers, to their surprise, have found different groups of students shining in an online learning environment. For example, teachers have experienced instances of students who are normally retiring or reticent learners in the face-to-face teaching paradigm being vociferous learners when learning purely online. Some students find their voice in a digital learning ecosystem (McWilliam, 2016). Teachers have come to recognise the extent to which vodcast lesson segments allow for self-paced, anytime learning which will challenge them in their efforts to differentiate learning in the future.

Be personalised to support the individual learning needs of teachers

As might be expected, different schools were at different stages of development with respect to digital learning platforms and teachers' digital literacy. It would also be readily understood that different teachers, at the onset of the prospect of learning-from-home, were at different stages of familiarity and comfort with digital technologies and their potential to enhance the learning experience of young people. Thus, after the operational training dimensions of working from home were established school by school, attention turned to professional learning needs of teachers.

Rogers (2003) outlines the stages which are usually observed through a change process. The Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003) outlines five levels of classification from 'Innovators' through to 'Laggards'. In the shift to on-line instruction, there was little time for

teachers to be anything but innovators or early adopters of change. Teachers may have been uncomfortable making these rapid changes but felt that they had little choice not to do so in the current climate. In our conversations, we heard many instances of teachers being delivered just in time learning from a colleague who had the technical expertise or the sought after online pedagogical skills to assist them in addressing their burning need – to deliver a purposeful lesson to their classes in the coming days in a mode which they had not imagined would exist this time last year. The degree of personalisation in the professional learning of teachers, delivered to individuals poised with a desperate need to learn new skills so that they could continue to thrive as teachers has provided the near-perfect environment to ensure that the learnings gained will be sustained and will make experienced teachers shift from merely experienced to a little more expert than they were before the great disruption.

Conclusion

The changes wrought by the COVID-19 disruption have brought about significant changes to teacher practice. Professional learning has been necessary and has made a difference to teachers' practice. What has become clear is that teachers have been willing to make changes to support the learning of their students – they have put the learning of the students at the centre of their work. It has been an experience that has highlighted teachers' adaptability and through the complexity of what learning and teaching entails may result in new levels of appreciation of the importance of teacher expertise (Hargreaves, 2020) and a reinforcement of teachers' status as essential knowledge workers in a coherent society. The discussions with the teachers revealed that all the key features of effective professional learning were evident to support the teachers make the necessary changes to teacher practice as they shifted to meet the needs of their students in the new environment created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moving forward, it will be interesting to observe the impact of the 'COVID-19 disruption' on any long-term change in teacher professional learning.

References

- AITSL (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership). (2020) *Spotlight: What works in online distance teaching and learning* (Melbourne: Author). Retrieved 5th November 2020, from: <<https://bit.ly/3f6YYOi>>.
- APPEL, M. (2019) Performativity and the demise of the teaching profession: The need for rebalancing in Australia, *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, ahead of print, 1-15. doi: 10.1080/1359866X.2019.1644611
- BAECHER, L. & KUNG, S.-C. (2011) Jumpstarting novice teachers' ability to analyze classroom video: Affordances of an online workshop, *Journal of Digital Learning in Teacher Education*, 28(1), pp. 16-26.
- BERLINER, D. C. (2004) Describing the behaviour and documenting the accomplishments of expert teachers, *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 24(3), pp. 200-212.
- BRYK, A. S. & SCHNEIDER, B. (2002) *Trust in Schools: A core resource for improvement* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation).

- BUCKLEY FLACK, C., WALKER, L., BICKERSTAFF, A., EARLE, H. & MARGETTS, C. (2020) *Educator Perspectives on the Impact of COVID-19 on Teaching and Learning in Australia and New Zealand* (Melbourne, Australia: Pivot Professional Learning). Retrieved 5th November 2020, from: <<https://bit.ly/3bU9MO0>>.
- BUCZYNSKI, S. & HANSEN, C. B. (2010) Impact of professional development on teacher practice: Uncovering connections, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(3), pp. 599-607.
- CLINTON, J. (2020) *Supporting Vulnerable Children in the Face of a Pandemic* (Melbourne, Australia: Centre for Program Evaluation, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne).
- DARLING-HAMMOND, L., HYLER, M. E. & GARDNER, M. (2017) *Effective Teacher Professional Development* (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute).
- DINHAM, S. (2016) *Leading Learning and Teaching* (Camberwell, Australia: ACER Press).
- DONOHOO, J. (2016) *Collective Efficacy: How educators' beliefs impact student learning* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press).
- DOUCET, A., NETOLICKY, D., TIMMERS, K. & TUSCANCO, F. J. (2020) *Thinking About Pedagogy in an Unfolding Pandemic: An independent report on approaches to distance learning during COVID19 school closures* (Brussels, Belgium: Education International). Retrieved 5th November 2020, from: <https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/2020_research_covid-19_eng>.
- DRANE, C., VERNON, L. & O'SHEA, S. (2020) *The Impact of 'Learning at Home' on the Educational Outcomes of Vulnerable Children in Australia during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Literature review* (Perth, Australia: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University). Retrieved 5th November 2020, from: <<https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/learning-at-home-educational-outcomes-vulnerable-children-australia-covid-19/>>.
- GREENLEAF, C. L., LITMAN, C., HANSON, T. L., ROSEN, R., BOSCARDIN, C. K., HERMAN, J., SCHNEIDER, S. A., MADDEN, S. & JONES, B. (2011) Integrating literacy and science in biology: Teaching and learning impacts of reading apprenticeship professional development, *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(3), pp. 647-717.
- GROUNDWATER-SMITH, S. & MOCKLER, N. (2009) *Teacher Professional Learning in an Age of Compliance: Mind the gap* (The Netherlands: Springer).
- GUTERRES, A. (2020, 23 April) *We Are All in this Together: Human rights and COVID-19 response and recovery*. New York: United Nations [Online]. Retrieved 5th November 2020, from: <<https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/we-are-all-together-human-rights-and-covid-19-response-and>>.
- HARGREAVES, A. (2020, 3 April) Teachers must lead schools' response to Covid-19, *TES Magazine* [Online]. Retrieved 5th November 2020, from: <<https://bit.ly/3fHHrWk>>.
- HATTIE, J. (2020) *Visible Learning Effect Sizes When Schools Are Closed: What matters and what does not* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin) [Online]. Retrieved 5th November 2020, from: <<https://au.corwin.com/en-gb/occe/visible-learning-research>>.
- HATTIE, J. & ZIERER, K. (2017) *10 Mind Frames for Visible Learning: Teaching for success* (London, UK: Routledge).
- HUSU, J. (2005) Analyzing teacher knowledge in its interactional positioning, in D. BEIJAARD, P. C. MEIJER, G. MORINE-DERSHIMER & H. TILLEMA (Eds), *Teacher Professional Development in Changing Conditions* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer), pp. 117-131.
- JEYNES, W. H. (2017) Effects of family educational cultures on student success at school: Directions for leadership, in K. LEITHWOOD, J. SUN & K. POLLOCK (Eds), *How School Leaders Contribute to Student Success: The four pathways framework* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer), pp. 311-328.
- KENNEDY, M. M. (2016) How does professional development improve teaching? *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), pp. 945-980.
- LAMB, S., MAIRE, Q., DOECKE, E., MACKLIN, S., NOBLE, K. & PILCHER, S. (2020) *Impact of Learning from Home on Educational Outcomes for Disadvantaged Children: Brief assessment* (Melbourne, Australia: Centre for International Research on Education Systems and the Mitchell Institute, Victoria University). Retrieved 5th November 2020, from: <<https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchell-institute/schooling/impact-of-learning-from-home-for-disadvantaged-children>>.

- LOUCKS-HORSLEY, S., STILES, K. E., MUNDRY, S. & HEWSON, P. W. (2009) *Designing Professional Development for Teachers of Science and Mathematics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press).
- MASTERS, G. N., TAYLOR-GUY, P., FRALLION, J. & CHASE, A.-M. (2020) *Ministerial Briefing Paper on Evidence of the Likely Impact on Educational Outcomes of Vulnerable Children Learning at Home during COVID-19. Student Learning Processes 24* (Adelaide: Australian Council for Educational Research). Retrieved 5th November 2020, from: <https://www.dese.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/ministerial_briefing_paper_covid19_and_vulnerable_children_acer_22april2020.pdf>.
- MCWILLIAM, E. (2016) Shifting centres: Pedagogical relations in the era of big data, *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 19(1), pp. 40-55.
- OECD. (2009) *Creating Effective Teaching and Learning Environments: First results from TALIS: Summary in English* (Paris, France: Author).
- PEPPER, F. (Presenter). (2020, 16 May) *Corona Tales – Part five* (S. Townsend, Producer, L. Clarke, Performer) [Everything is a bit weird right now]. Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Corporation. (Podcast) Retrieved 5th November 2020, from: <<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/radio-national-fictions/corona-tales-part-five/12234988>>.
- ROBINSON, V., BENDIKSON, L., MCNAUGHTON, S., WILSON, A. & ZHU, T. (2017) Joining the dots: The challenge of creating coherent school improvement, *Teachers College Record*, 119(080302), pp. 1-44.
- ROBINSON, V. & GRAY, E. (2019) What difference does school leadership make to student outcomes? *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, 49(2), pp. 171-187.
- ROGERS, E. M. (2003) *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th edn (New York, NY: Free Press).
- STOLL, L. (2010) Connecting learning communities: Capacity building for systemic change, in A. HARGREAVES, A. LIEBERMAN, M. FULLAN & D. HOPKINS (Eds.), *Second International Handbook of Educational Change*, Vol. 23 (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer), pp. 469-484.
- TAYLOR, A. J. (2016) *Teachers' Experience of Professional Standards for Teachers: A case study of the enactment of teaching standards in a high performing school system*. Doctoral dissertation (Sydney: Australian Catholic University).
- THOMPSON, P., KRIEWALDT, J. & REDMAN, C. (2020) Elaborating a model for teacher professional learning to sustain improvement in teaching practice, *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, ahead of print, pp. 1-30.
- WILSON, R. & MUDE, W. (2020, 14 May) 'We had no sanitiser, no soap and minimal toilet paper': Here's how teachers feel about going back to the classroom, *The Conversation* [Online]. Retrieved 6th November 2020, from: <<https://bit.ly/3cBshXX>>.