



Teachers' perceptions of an online professional development experience: Implications for a design and implementation framework

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers face challenges regarding access to quality professional development.
- This study examined secondary teachers' perceptions of an OTPD experience.
- OTPD is supported by adult learning theory and social constructivism.
- This qualitative multi-case study utilized within-case and cross-case analysis.
- Results included empirical evidence of six OTPD design and implementation features.

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ABSTRACT

Teachers face multifaceted challenges regarding access to quality professional development. Although technology is increasingly utilized to address this concern, access alone does not ensure effective OTPD. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of the design and implementation of a job-embedded OTPD experience. Supported by adult learning theory and social constructivism, this qualitative multi-case study utilized within-case and cross-case analysis to examine results. These findings, presented through teachers' voices, included explicit and empirical evidence of six OTPD design and implementation features that address multiple gaps in the extant literature and contribute to an OTPD framework.

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1. Introduction

The importance of quality teaching and professional development (PD) designed to promote student learning outcomes has become especially significant in recent decades for teachers in the United States who have faced increased pressures from high-stakes testing, accountability, and the standards movement as they are tasked with the achievement of all students in increasingly diverse classrooms. Moreover, recent reform efforts underscore a continued focus on teacher quality and PD, including changes in

teacher evaluation systems such as value-added measures (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Goldhaber, 2015) that consider student test scores to quantify teacher impact on student learning and federal legislation such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that promotes college and career readiness and includes high-stakes tests. Likewise, countries around the world focus on improving teacher quality and PD (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Easton, 2013; Stewart, 2011) to enhance student learning outcomes necessary for a global society.

These challenges are exacerbated when access to quality PD is impacted by time, financial, and geographic constraints (Blanchard, LePrevost, Tolin, & Guitierrez, 2016; Duffy et al., 2006; Easton, 2013; Huang, 2002; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2014; Ross, 2011) experienced by teachers in the United States and internationally. Thus, online teacher professional development (OTPD) is increasingly utilized to help

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address such concerns through flexible, cost-effective, wide-scale options on a myriad of educational topics. However, access to OTPD does not ensure quality experiences or outcomes and may create a false sense of effectiveness if technology is used merely as a delivery tool void of effective design or implementation principles. [Vrasidas and Zembylas \(2004\)](#) asserted that technology alone does not promote PD, yet can be utilized with constructivist principles to enhance PD, and noted the lack of research-based frameworks to support development and evaluation. This concern is intensified when considering increased access to technology around the world and its use in teacher PD ([Burns, 2013](#)). To promote efficacy of online learning, standards emerged that incorporated tenets of effective PD and addressed unique online environment characteristics.

The Southern Regional Education Board ([SREB, 2004](#)) developed a three-part guideline for online learning featuring context, process, and content standards. Context standards address the roles of learning communities, leadership, and resources, and process standards examine the roles of data, evaluation, research, design, learning, and collaboration, while content standards examine the roles of equity and quality teaching. Similarly, the International Society for Technology in Education ([ISTE, 2008](#)) published standards that guide teachers on effective uses of technology for instruction, assessment, and professional learning, and the International Association for K-12 Online Learning ([iNACOL, 2011](#)) created the National Standards for Quality Online Courses that underscore the effective use of content, instruction, assessment, technology, and evaluation in online learning.

Still, [Ketelhut, McCloskey, Dede, Breit, and Whitehouse \(2006\)](#) were “dismayed by the dearth of empirical research into online teacher professional development and by the lack of teacher voice in its design, and yet impressed by the vast array of available, exemplary programs based on many different approaches and media” (p. 237). In fact, [Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, and McCloskey \(2009\)](#) posited a research agenda to address such issues, asserting the need for rigorous OTPD research that is essential for PD developers, educators, and funders.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of the design and implementation of a job-embedded OTPD experience. As part of a larger study on teacher PD, the OTPD experience under study was examined in the context of high school social studies. Supported by adult learning theory and social constructivism, this qualitative multi-case study utilized within-case and cross-case analysis ([Miles & Huberman, 1994](#)) to examine results. These findings revealed explicit and empirical evidence of six OTPD design and implementation features through teachers' voices that address multiple calls and gaps in the extant literature and provide unique contributions to OTPD framework research.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Effective teacher professional development

Despite concerns with the nature and scope of teacher PD, the literature on effective PD revealed a consensus on tenets that impact teacher practice and enhance student learning outcomes. [Learning Forward \(2012\)](#), an association promoting teacher effectiveness through professional learning and formerly known as the National Staff Development Council, asserted effective PD includes the use of learning communities, leadership, resources, data, learning designs, implementation, and outcomes. [Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon's \(2001\)](#) study indicated effective PD featured structural and core features including format of the activity, collaborative participation by teachers, duration of the

activity, while the core features of effective PD included content knowledge, engaging opportunities for teachers to learn, and coherence with other PD activities. [Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarlos, and Shapely's \(2007\)](#) study posited that participation in PD for approximately 49 h can increase student achievement by about 21 percentage points after examining nine studies out of over 1300 that met standards of the What Works Clearinghouse, a United States Department of Education program that examines high-quality education research results. [Kennedy's work \(1998\)](#) examined impacts of teacher PD in mathematics and science revealing teacher knowledge of how students learn is more effective than PD that simply delivers content knowledge.

However, despite what is known about effective teacher PD, the literature revealed ongoing concerns which included one-time workshops with few opportunities for follow-up, collaboration, or reflection ([Joyce & Showers, 2002](#)). A literature review ([Powell & Bodur, 2016](#)) on the current state of teacher PD highlighted the relationship between quality teaching and student learning outcomes, noting concerns remain about the focus and extent of teacher PD decades after landmark reports and seminal studies. These ongoing concerns prompted a paradigm shift to job-embedded PD ([Ross, 2011](#); [Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2010](#); [Zepeda, 2015](#)), which is defined by its routine use of follow-up, on-going reflection, collaboration, and support for teachers, all of which promote capacity-building PD and address pitfalls of traditional teacher PD in face-to-face or online settings. [Yendol-Hoppey and Dana \(2010\)](#) utilized four building blocks to examine job-embedded PD including knowledge sources, knowledge types, orientation, and learning needs. These building blocks support key tenets such as knowledge for, in, and of practice ([Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999](#)), reflection ([Schön, 1983](#)), and knowledge types such as content, pedagogical, student, curriculum, pedagogical content, and context ([Shulman, 1987](#)).

Likewise, effective teacher PD around the world reflects these characteristics and challenges ([Darling-Hammond, 2017](#); [Darling-Hammond et al., 2009](#); [Easton, 2013](#); [OECD, 2014](#)). [Barber and Mourshed \(2007\)](#) conducted an international study that examined attributes of the worlds' top-performing schools and asserted teacher quality, instructional improvement, and instruction that promotes success for all students were the three most significant success factors. The follow-up international study ([Barber, Chijioke, & Mourshed, 2010](#)) examined school systems' improvement strategies and asserted the significance of teacher quality, instructional practice, teacher collaboration, context, structure, and resources, further underscoring the need for quality teacher PD. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ([OECD, 2014](#)) administered the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) in 34 countries and economies to examine the state of global teaching and learning. The results included disparities about the amount and effectiveness of teacher PD and barriers to participation such as conflicts with teachers' work schedules, lack of incentives, cost, and relevancy, while highlighting the importance of collaboration, time allocation, and support that ranged from financial support to release time for study. For instance, Australia promotes teacher PD through routine collaboration with colleagues, teacher-student teams, and high levels of participation in subject-area teams ([Easton, 2013](#); [OECD, 2009](#)). In Japan, although teachers work more hours than teachers in other OECD countries, they spend less time teaching to meet requirements of working with administration and collaborating with colleagues ([Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \[OECD\], 2017](#)), time often devoted to lesson study. [Burns and Darling-Hammond \(2014\)](#) noted that TALIS did not indicate whether the impact of teacher PD was related to PD design and implementation.

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