



Professional development design: Embedding educational reform in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Teacher professional development variously supports ongoing skill development, new knowledge, and systems change. In New Zealand, the implementation of major assessment reforms in senior secondary schools provided opportunity to investigate teacher professional development as a function of the particular stage of an educational reform. Multi-method data sources including teacher surveys and school case studies were employed to evaluate professional development during the embedding stage of a standards-based assessment system, revealing a positive relationship between professional satisfaction and teacher involvement in setting priorities for the professional development. Other positive features were networking, personalized learning, and facilitator expertise. This research illustrates the importance of tailoring professional learning to implementation phase of an organizational change.

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1. Introduction

Teacher professional development differs in purpose and design from initial teacher education. While both are focused on adult learners with various personal beliefs and knowledge of subject areas to be taught, teacher professional development requires qualitatively different professional behavior in complex contexts (Borko, Davinroy, Bliem, & Cumbo, 2000; Borko, Mayfield, Marion, Flexer, & Cumbo, 1997). Professional development may also have different intended outcomes including enhancing professional skills and understandings; updating the teaching profession; and supporting major educational changes and reforms that have an impact on teaching practice (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006). Because in-service teachers are not naïve learners, teacher professional development builds on existing knowledge and understandings that can either facilitate or impede the acquisition of new ideas and approaches. This is particularly so at a time of significant educational reform, when teachers and schools are challenged fundamentally to change direction and practice (McCaslin, 2006).

In New Zealand, the introduction of a new system for the assessment in the senior secondary school known as NCEA (National Certificate in Educational Achievement) required major changes in educational and teacher understandings and

professional practices. The change involved the introduction of a flexible system of subject specific, standards-based assessments, selected, developed and administered by the teacher or sat through national exams, which when achieved can be accumulated towards qualifications. It replaced a more rigid norm-referenced system which had an achievement grade for each subject derived from final exams or external moderation. For the majority of teachers this was a major change, differing from their own schooling and professional training experiences. As Senge (1990) emphasized, success in any reform hinges on what happens at the smallest unit of the organization: for schools, it is the teacher who implements new policy and practice in the classroom.

This research evaluates how teacher professional development during the embedding stage of a national or large scale reform may differ fundamentally from other forms of teacher education and professional development. During the earlier phases of NCEA implementation, professional development activities had been designed nationally and delivered regionally with an emphasis on consistency and quality. During this final phase of support for the NCEA, new funding and provision of professional development were devolved to individual schools to make decisions as a school or regional level, based on the assumption that local schools and specific subject area teachers had mastered basic understandings of the new system and were now in a position to decide for themselves what further development was needed. We hypothesized that, in contrast to the early stages of a reform, teacher self-reports and satisfaction with professional development activities during this final, embedding phase of the NCEA would vary as a function of

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the extent to which teachers had control of or input into the nature and content of their professional development.

1.1. *Models of effective professional development*

Models of professional development vary in their emphasis upon whether it is the characteristics of the learner and/or characteristics of the new knowledge that determines the effective professional development. Salas and Cannon-Bowers (2001) describe a skills development approach comprising key elements of effective professional development reflecting primarily learning needs such as attention to training theories, training needs analyses, antecedent training conditions, training methods and strategies, and post-training conditions. Context is most relevant with respect to whether the training needs analysis accurately reflects pre-training events about the organization, the job or task; and the individual participant, thus emphasizing that professional training must build on existing knowledge, skills and experience. Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon (2001) reported the effectiveness of professional development designed specifically for teachers that reflected aspects of this approach. These included focusing professional development content of specific pedagogical content knowledge (e.g., a specific subject area concept), providing multiple opportunities for active learning (e.g., being observed and reviewing student work), and making explicit how the professional development fits with what teachers already know (e.g., coherence with teacher priorities).

A consistent theme for skill development approaches is the importance of time, opportunity, collegial feedback, and support for implementation in the classroom to enact effective professional development that has an impact on what happens in the classroom (duFour, 2004; Hill, Hawk, & Taylor, 2001; Twist, 2002). Further, the content of professional development must be consistent with the teachers needs at that time (Garet et al., 2001). Black (2001) in his review of the NCEA proposal identified a number of concerns to be addressed for successful implementation of the NCEA. He argued the importance of focusing professional development on broad issues such as addressing teacher understanding of the principles underpinning standards-based assessment and the influence of changing assessment practices on teaching and learning. Similarly, Nixon (2004) emphasized that the nature of the NCEA as a major reform required changes not only in how students are assessed but also how teachers think about education, teaching, learning, and knowledge. Consequently, effective professional development must engage teachers with the “bigger” ideas underpinning their pedagogy, not simply teach operational skills that may in fact contradict underlying understandings.

In contrast, stage models of professional development presume trainee movement through developmental career stages that start from novice, move to advanced beginner, then competent, proficient, and finally expert; further, most teachers may only ever reach the proficient level with only a few attaining expert status (Billet, 2001; Ericsson & Smith, 1991; Livingston & Borko, 1989). Closely related to the stage model is a step-wise model, whereby skill development is cumulative across one's career and developed through practical experience in the classroom (Sternberg & Ben-Zeev, 2001). Teacher levels of development may overlap across years of experience depending on teacher ability and achievement (as for children), but these models imply that professional development should be tailored for different levels of experience.

Common themes in the literature reviewed for effective professional development are that the professional development should take into account the participants' own aspirations, skills, knowledge and understanding; provide theoretical and content knowledge; that the design of the learning environment should enable learners to be involved in learning process; and that

effective professional development ensures educational practices are changed and that this is most likely to occur when teachers are provided with the time to do so (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006; Mitchell & Cubey, 2003). What has not been adequately considered to date is the extent to which approaches to teacher professional development should vary based on the stage of organizational change rather than being determined primarily by pre-existing teacher skills, understandings, and years of experience in teaching. For the initiation and embedding of major educational and organizational change, a complex model of professional development may be needed that integrates both participant learner needs as well as the stage of a reform.

1.2. *Embedding the NCEA as educational reform: the case of New Zealand*

At the beginning of a new reform, most if not all teachers may be seen to be novices with regard to new practices despite their experience or number of years in the classroom. Professional development in the early stages of a reform such as the NCEA cannot ignore teacher predispositions but must instead engage teachers—regardless of their experience level—in the development of new understandings that may contradict existing beliefs about effective pedagogy. Just as teachers differ in their levels of experience and skill, they will also differ in the extent to which they are willing and able to engage with new understandings as well as acquire the operational strategies needed to implement a reform, so that professional development in the early stage of major educational change must focus heavily on the “why” of a reform as well as the “how.”

In New Zealand, the introduction of the NCEA in 2002 represented major conceptual and practical departures from previous educational policy and practices. These included replacing the previously norm-referenced subject-based examinations with a system of criterion-referenced classroom-based assessments and external examinations for individual achievement standards in each of the final three years of secondary school. Each “standard” has a number of credits allocated, and students gain a National Certificate in Educational Achievement at levels one, two or three by successfully achieving assessment tasks to accumulate the required total number of credits overall. The NCEA signaled confidence in teacher assessments with classroom assessments comprising a significant proportion of assessment overall in an educational system where results of such assessments had not previously been a major part of student permanent records. Teacher professional development during the initial phases of the introduction of the NCEA was centrally designed and organized, then delivered in the regions according to national prescription with a focus on fidelity to key principles and practices. In contrast, the professional development evaluated in this research was focused on the “embedding” phase of the NCEA as an educational reform. In 2006, the New Zealand Ministry of Education allocated professional development funds to all schools with senior students to support the consolidation of the NCEA. The funds were devolved to schools based on the assumption that teachers and school leaders were in the best position to identify what may well be diverse needs four years into a reform in comparison to earlier phases. This shift of control to the schools was based on the assumption that professionals now understood and largely accepted the basic principles and approach of the NCEA and that professional development needs would be largely focused on the “nuts and bolts” of implementation.

Decision-making regarding the use of professional development time and resources was devolved to each individual school principal. Schools were provided with a needs analysis kit and suggested planning format but not required to utilize these resources. Each school was allocated proportionate funding (according to the

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