



# The role of professional obligations in working to change one's teaching practices



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We analyzed two teachers' goals, practices, and justifications of their teaching.
- Teachers' efforts to change were limited by perceived professional obligations.
- The obligation to avoid student confusion limited change for one teacher.
- Obligations to the discipline (mathematics) constrained both teachers.

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## ABSTRACT

Teaching practices do not change easily. In this article, we explore this phenomenon by viewing teaching as a cultural activity in which teachers' decisions are influenced by professional obligations. We present the cases of two secondary mathematics teachers and share data regarding their expressed goals, their perceived obligations, and their instructional practice. Our findings suggest that perceived obligations hindered the teachers' efforts to change their practice. We argue that efforts to help teachers realize their goals need to acknowledge, and perhaps position as resources, the obligations that teachers perceive as inherent in their professional role.

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## 1. Introduction

Supporting changes in teaching practice is one of the most enduring problems in education (Hiebert, 2013). Despite good intentions and well-laid conceptual foundations, many educational reform movements have failed to produce fundamental changes in the teaching practices of individual teachers (Cohen, 1990; Jacobs et al., 2006; Rousseau, 2004; Spillane, 2004; Spillane & Zeuli, 1999; Warfield, Wood, & Lehman, 2005). In the United States, for example, mathematics teaching generally looks and feels much as it has over the last 50 years; a classroom where sense-making is overshadowed by an emphasis on using standard procedures and

getting the correct answers (Hiebert, 2013; Hiebert et al., 2005; Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969; Silver, Mesa, Morris, Star, & Benken, 2009). In Europe, despite a general increase in positive attitude towards inquiry-based practices in science and mathematics, survey data suggest that implementation of such practices varies widely by country (Engeln, Euler, & Maass, 2013).

Some have explained the difficulty in changing teaching practices as a mismatch between beliefs of individual teachers and the goals of reform, or as a problem of individual teacher knowledge, or both (e.g., Arbaugh, Lannin, Jones, & Park-Rogers, 2006; Borko et al., 1992; Hill et al., 2008; Lloyd & Wilson, 1998; Maass, 2011; Manouchehri & Goodman, 2000; Warfield et al., 2005; Wilson & Goldenberg, 1998). But others have approached the issue from a socio-cultural perspective, characterizing teaching not as emanating only from the capacities of individual teachers, but as a cultural activity in which teaching practices and values are handed down from one generation to the next (e.g., Baba, Iwasaki, Ueda, & Date, 2012; Cai & Wang, 2010; Correa, Perry, Sims, Miller, & Fang,

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2008; Hiebert, 2013; Nuthall, 2005; Wong, Wong, & Wong, 2012). From this view, changing teaching is not simply a matter of changing the beliefs or knowledge of individuals; reform efforts need to acknowledge the presence and influence of the culture of teaching.

*Practical rationality* draws on this idea by describing the norms and obligations that are common to professional practice (Herbst, 2010; Herbst & Chazan, 2003). It acknowledges that teachers are not free to do their jobs however they please; their actions and decisions are constrained by the fact that they take on a professional role that comes with explicit and implicit “rules” for carrying out that role. Because practical rationality identifies dispositions that “have currency in a collective” (Herbst, 2010, p. 49), teachers’ decisions are influenced by norms and obligations that have origins outside of their own personal resources.

In this paper, we draw on the practical rationality framework to examine the cases of two secondary mathematics teachers, each of whom expresses goals for her teaching that she finds herself struggling to enact. We identify conflicts between their professed goals for their teaching and their enacted teaching practices, and then examine the obligations they used to justify teaching decisions that were in conflict with their goals. This research sheds light on the role of professional obligations in constraining teachers’ ability to make desired changes to their teaching, and we argue that these findings have implications for those who work to support teachers in their efforts to change.

## 2. Literature review and theoretical framework

### 2.1. Studying teaching from an individualistic perspective: a focus on beliefs and knowledge

Much research on the decision making of teachers positions beliefs and knowledge of individuals as the primary motivators behind teachers’ actions (Richardson, 1996; Richardson & Placier, 2001; Schoenfeld, 2010). For example, the lack of effect of reform efforts has often been attributed to conflicts between the beliefs of the teachers and the teaching approach embodied by the reform (Arbaugh et al., 2006; Handal & Herrington, 2003; Lloyd & Wilson, 1998; Manouchehri & Goodman, 2000; Rousseau, 2004; Wilson & Goldenberg, 1998). As Handal and Herrington (2003) put it, “If the mathematics teachers’ beliefs are not congruent with the beliefs underpinning an educational reform, then the aftermath of such a mismatch can affect the degree of success of the innovation as well as the teachers’ morale and willingness to implement further innovation” (p. 60).

In this paper we focus on the long-term goals that teachers have for themselves. Teachers’ goals are closely related to their beliefs about teaching (Thompson, 1992), but goals are more personal, related not to what a teacher believes about mathematics teaching generally, but to what a teacher wants to accomplish in *her own* teaching. Research suggests that goals are important influences on teaching (Aguirre & Speer, 2000; Angelo & Cross, 1993; Aunola, Leskinen, & Nurmi, 2006; Raudenbush, Rowan, & Cheong, 1993; Stipek, Givvin, Salmon, & MacGyvers, 2001; Thompson, Phillip, Thompson, & Boyd, 1994). However, a number of studies show teachers enacting practices that are seemingly at odds with their expressed goals and/or beliefs (e.g., Barkatsas & Malone, 2005; Law, Wong, & Lee, 2012; Raymond, 1997; Rousseau, 2004; Skott, 2001; Thompson, 1984).

For example, Engeln et al. (2013) found that, although there was a positive orientation towards inquiry-based practices across Europe, only eight percent of science and mathematics teachers in their survey reported regularly using such practices, while 51% were still highly teacher-centered. Studies have shown similar

inconsistencies between beliefs and practice in other disciplines, including grammar (Farrell & Lim, 2005; Phipps & Borg, 2009), foreign language (Graham, Santos, & Francis-Brophy, 2014), literacy (Sverdlov, Aram, & Levin, 2014), and science (Beyer & Davis, 2008). In mathematics, Rousseau (2004) described a curriculum reform effort in the United States where teachers expressed a desire to implement a vision of teaching where students would have agency to develop their own solutions to open-ended tasks, using collaborative discussions and generating mathematical justifications for their ideas. At the same time, the teachers believed that students needed to be explicitly taught procedural skills to succeed in the next course. Their inability to resolve the conflict between these visions led to eventual abandonment of the curriculum reform effort. Studies like these raise questions about how teachers negotiate different and sometimes conflicting beliefs to make instructional decisions.

Barkatsas and Malone (2005) suggest that research should look beyond the resources of individual teachers. In a study conducted in Greece, the teacher Ann struggled to enact her socio-constructivist beliefs, discussing, among other factors, the difficulty of stepping outside established routines to enact innovative practice. This study supports the idea that teachers do not simply enact their beliefs, but that they are influenced by the norms and constraints that are attached to their teaching role. Indeed, Barkatsas and Malone (2005) concluded that Ann’s case “highlighted the need to address the contribution of cultural influences in the formation of teachers’ beliefs, and the transformation into practical approaches” (p. 86).

The idea that teaching is a cultural practice finds support in research that describes how teaching in different countries is influenced by the traditions, history, and values drawn from the larger national culture (Baba et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2012). Cai and Wang’s (2010) comparison of “distinguished” teachers from China and the United States revealed patterns in how teachers from each country described their image of effective teachers. While teachers from both countries described obligations like caring for and motivating children, United States teachers placed emphasis on personal traits like a sense of humor and enthusiasm, as well as classroom management and adjusting instruction to meet the needs of individuals. The Chinese teachers emphasized the preparation of well organized and coherent lesson plans and explaining concepts well. This study lends weight to the idea that teachers do draw a culturally normative framework of values and goals to guide their teaching (Rogoff, 2003), although this framework may look different in different parts of the world (e.g., Jacobs & Morita, 2002; Jacobs, Yoshida, Stigler, & Fernandez, 1997).

### 2.2. Studying teaching from a cultural perspective: a focus on norms and obligations

If teaching is a cultural practice, then teachers are not autonomous; rather, they are individuals who play a role that comes with implicit rules (Buchmann, 1986). *Practical rationality* is a way of talking about these rules (Herbst, 2010; Herbst & Chazan, 2003, 2011, 2012; Herbst, Nachlieli, & Chazan, 2011). It “outlines boundaries between what it is reasonable, or customary, for a teacher to do and what is deemed as ‘out of bounds’” (Herbst et al., 2011, p. 219).

The resources afforded by the practical rationality of mathematics teaching are *norms* and *obligations*. Norms are practices that are so ingrained in the culture of teaching that most teachers would not feel the need to justify them. Obligations, on the other hand, are what teachers would typically reference if pressed to justify their teaching practices. They are experienced as a sense of what one *should* or *must* do, as opposed to merely what one would like to do. Professional obligations exist by virtue of the teacher’s position in a

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