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*In memory of Richard Jones
1967–2015*

Editors

Special Issue: *Stopping for a moment: The influence of change on teachers' professional practice*

Jenny Ferrier-Kerr and Kerry Earl

With afterword by Susan Groundwater-Smith

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About the Journal

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Notes for Contributors

Teachers and Curriculum welcomes

- innovative practice papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords;
- research informed papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords;
- thinkpieces with a maximum of 1500 words; and
- book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

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Teachers and Curriculum provides an avenue for the publication of papers that

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- reports on research in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment;

- provides examples of innovative curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practice; and
- review books and other resources that have a curriculum, pedagogy and assessment focus.

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Foot/End Notes

These should be **avoided where possible**; the journal preference is for footnotes rather than endnotes.

Referencing

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Acknowledgement of Reviewers

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MAKING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PERSONAL

KELLY-ANNE POWERS

Kelly-Anne is a primary school teacher in Taumarunui. She completed her initial teacher education at Palmerston North Teachers' College in the early 90s. After three years, armed with a Diploma of Teaching she was keen to get to work. Kelly-Anne always intended to complete her degree so 20 years later she returned to study. She has taught mostly in junior classes, with a recent change to upper primary levels. Leadership roles in curriculum professional development over the last few years have inspired her to step outside of her comfort zone, challenge and grow her knowledge and skills and pursue further study, which she has found very rewarding.

Professional summary

In this paper, the author compares her professional development experiences in and out of the school setting, and explores the advantages and, on occasion, the disadvantages they have presented. Readers are invited to reflect on how collaboration, collegiality, and a commitment to being in a community of learning are integral to professional learning.

As an 'experienced' teacher of about 20 years, with the majority of that time teaching in junior classes, I considered myself an effective and reflective teacher who was responsive to students' learning needs. I consciously balanced their individual needs with my overview of academic progression based on my experience and curriculum knowledge. I have however, come to understand that I was generally a surface reflector (Larivee, 2008), making sense of my immediate circumstances with more reaction than forward-thinking. I was a victim of 'busy-ness' and my commitment to a creative and innovative classroom programme was out of balance with habits and routines that were frequently in response to time limitations. As well as wearing many extra-curricular hats in the school setting, I constantly strived for balance with my personal life but as so many teachers feel and—there was more often than not, just not enough time in the day.

My reading of the literature suggests there are three essential habits of teachers that prevail and enable teachers to maximise the benefits in their practice. These habits include: engaging in critical reflection on practice (Larivee, 2008; Smith, 2002); collaborating with peers (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000; Ng & Tan, 2009); and seeking to deepen knowledge and strengthen skills (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Kwang, 2001). It is agreed by these authors and others that desirable habits are the most effective when integrated into the daily school life of teachers (Robinson, 2003; Sardon & Charteris, 2012). In my personal experience, I have found this to be very true but I have also discovered huge benefits in removing myself from the school setting to undertake further studies. Over the past four years I have been involved in professional learning within my school setting that has set me on a path to develop the habits identified above and led me to undertake further study.

In 2010, I was asked to be the lead teacher for an in-depth numeracy development. With an inspiring facilitator nudging and challenging me, and my own feelings of being 'in the spotlight' and wanting to be a good example as the lead teacher, I soon found myself reflecting in new ways. Larivee (2008) describes this as pedagogical reflection where more widely accepted best practices, supported by theory and research are applied. With the regular visits of the facilitator, planned classroom observations and staff meetings I had to lead, I was seeing my practice through different eyes. I was seeing not just my own story, but also the perspectives of my students, colleagues and literature (Smith, 2002).

Although changes were occurring in my practice and I was very much aware of the positive effects of those changes, it was not until 2014 while on leave to undertake fulltime study that I gained a depth of understanding of the process I have been through and its significance. The literature I have been exposed to has described not only the behaviours I can see in myself in hindsight but also shows how I can develop and extend these habits into the future. Ethics for example, is a topic that does not seem immediately relevant to the curriculum and therefore is not often addressed in professional development in schools (except perhaps in an 'ambulance at the bottom of the cliff' scenario when ethical problems arise) but it is very relevant to teachers' practice though with consideration of ethical

implications an essential component of teachers' critical reflection (Larivee, 2008). Subsequently, I have a new awareness of the consequences of my actions and my assumptions within both my own practice and the broader social and professional contexts. Not only has the time factor been removed from the equation by my study leave but my mind is free from the demands of administrative, practical, duty-bound tasks to fully commit to my learning journey.

Collaboration in a community of practice

I have found having a shared curriculum focus for professional development and working collaboratively with my colleagues in a constructive, inquiry-based way in the school and classroom setting to be hugely enriching to my teaching practice. As Ng and Tan (2009) claim, we developed and were engaged as a community of practice in deepening our knowledge and expertise through interaction in a social and cognitive process they call 'sensemaking'. Guskey (1986) believes in the value of professional development occurring in the workplace. He offers a model of the process of teacher change that sees a change in beliefs and attitudes happening after the teachers have had an opportunity to trial new classroom practices with on-going support and time to share and to see evidence of change in students' outcomes. I can certainly say that my experiences have been similar to this model - the changes to my attitudes, beliefs and consequent practice have been significant.

Having said that, our community of practice that consisted of the teaching staff of a small school or a small town, together with a few external providers could be limiting. While the shared context, concerns and curriculum foci became motivators that encouraged us to work together, support each other, and provided time away, as well as to use time and resources efficiently, I observed that it could also constrain the perspectives of the group and the individuals within it. Over the course of my study this year I have become part of a much wider community of practice: through the discussion groups of fellow students; through developing a professional on-line presence via social media; and through having both the time and the inclination to explore beyond meeting my immediate needs and the needs prioritised by the group. Furthermore, I have been able to follow themes of my own personal and professional interests and have also come to realise the vast range of new perspectives, initiatives and possibilities in teaching and learning that I might never have discovered. Being on study leave, without daily classroom needs dominating my attention, enabled me to generalise and broaden my perspective of not only my own practice but the nature of teaching itself, taking me beyond sensemaking into critically reflective learning (Ng & Tan, 2009).

Clement and Vandenberghe (2000) compare and contrast the benefits of solitary and collegial forms of professional development. These authors conclude that within conducive school environments solitary and collegial forms of professional development can complement and reinforce each other hence a positive tension between the two can be maintained in a cyclic system; individual pursuits consolidated in sharing; and shared pursuits lead to individual variations. Solitary learning offers freedom, choice and ownership while collegial learning offers support, challenge and fresh perspectives. Solitary learning has enabled me to address what I felt were personal, professional weaknesses and to follow my own interests, while at the same time giving me access to different people for collegial benefits.

Learning and development

Three core features of professional development that maximise the positive impact on teaching and learning have been identified by Garet et al. (2001) as content, active learning and coherence. I have recognised that these three core features each has a strong presence in the shared development foci at my school. First, a dual focus on both content knowledge and how children learn this content knowledge appeared to have a greater impact on teachers' professional development than any single focus. Second, teachers' participation in active learning that includes observing experts; being observed and receiving feedback; being involved in planning and linking new ideas to their own context; and making meaningful analysis of students' work and the effects of teaching was highly effective. Finally, coherence as it relates to teachers' perceptions of how the professional development is consistent with their own needs impact on teachers' programmes, curriculum, and assessment. Coherence also incorporated communication, which promoted and sustained motivation, reflection and depth of understanding. These features were underpinned by the strong need for ownership,

efficiency and evidence that I consider led to professional development being effective and successful for me and my colleagues.

Notably, my studies this year have allowed other aspects of the core features to become evident. As Garet et al. (2001) also describe, a continual deepening of knowledge and skills is a central element of professionalism hence I have challenged myself to deepen my content knowledge beyond the usual requirements of my junior class. They further describe active learning through writing and presenting on topics as a way to delve more deeply into content knowledge and my studies have given me multiple opportunities to do this. I have rediscovered a particular pleasure and passion in writing and have been able to integrate my learning beyond the immediate focus of my classroom.

University study has also given me an awareness of, and access to, the vast amount of educational research that is available, giving me a more broadly informed perspective for inquiry and reflection. As Smardon and Charteris (2012) advocate, “When teachers become critical consumers of research and policy, brokering interpretations that are appropriate to their localised context, they make informed professional decisions” (p. 30). Furthermore, I feel empowered to conduct my own research through inquiry. If a teacher’s professional obligation is to challenge the adequacy of their beliefs, to seek evidence to inform their decisions and to foster a teacher culture then we “can learn together about how to do our job differently” (Robinson, 2003, p. 28).

Conclusion

The professional development opportunities I have had in my school over the past four years have met the criteria described by many researchers for effective change to occur in teaching and learning. They set me on a path to developing the essential skills of reflection and collaboration. But these opportunities had a shared and specific focus, usually relating directly to the particular needs of the students and teachers at that time and place. They consisted of small but frequent and persistent steps throughout the year to maintain manageability in the endlessly busy life of the school. Undertaking a year’s study on leave this year has had three key benefits. First, the removal from my familiar context. I have been able to deepen and broaden my knowledge and skills beyond my usual context, engage with a new and much wider community of practice, and follow interests for learning outside of the school’s shared focus. Second, is time and attention. I believe schools are the most demanding of workplaces and I was operating in a strict regime of prioritisation to meet all my obligations, in which professional development did not always feature. The third benefit is my greater awareness of my own thinking and learning processes with reference to educational research findings. I have made and continue to make conscious decisions about my future actions based on my prior experiences in the light of new understandings.

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