Teachers in control of their own professional learning!

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Joel Malin explores a bottom-Up, self-directed, evidence-informed approach to professional learning

When contemplating about whether I had something to contribute for this exciting special issue, I spent most of my time thinking about the nature and potential of professional development. It soon became clear that I have a range of key reflections to share – based both on my ongoing scholarship and on my engagement in learning networks such as the WERA-IRN. Overall, I offer up five broad recommendations which frame my vision of a bottom-up, self-directed, evidence-informed approach to professional learning.

1. Let's shed/replace the term *Professional Development*
I align with scholars and educators[i] who propose reconceptualizing *professional development*, shifting to focus on individual and collective *professional learning*. This may seem like a small move, but I see it as carrying large benefits. First, this reframe can help to free us from limiting notions of teachers being developed by outside entities or experts. A shift toward emphasizing professional learning implies, instead, that, as practicing education professionals we all bring considerable knowledge to the table already, and our main focus accordingly can/should be to elevate and build on this knowledge in the pursuit of continued (individual and collective) growth.[ii] Such a way of thinking also appropriately demonstrates trust in educators as competent and creative professionals, protecting their agency to pose questions, identify strengths and issues, and work to address their own (and their colleagues') prioritized needs.

I write this as someone who lives and works in an environment that has been insufficiently trusting of teachers and other educators, to put it mildly. This lack of trust has been manifested for instance by policies aimed at managing them (e.g., via tightened accountability, teacher-proofing curricula, and teacher evaluation policy) rather than investing in, nurturing, and empowering them. Such approaches might fit within a *low teacher agency*[iii] approach to educational change. My vision sharply contrasts: I desire a bottom-up and *high teacher agency*[iv] approach to making educational change, one that would freely acknowledge that schools and school systems can and must seek to improve, but that would draw on and integrate educators', scholars', and partners' diverse perspectives and knowledge regarding how to identify and actualize such changes.

2. Let's continuously assess what we know and need to know, and go from there
Knowledge assumes multiple forms. We can think of scientific or factual knowledge (*episteme*, using Aristotle's nomenclature), technical knowledge (*techne*), and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). In this regard, moreover, educators, researchers, policymakers, and other interested stakeholders all can and should be viewed as "holders of valuable knowledge … that can be brought to bear on educational policy and practice."[v] The primary focus for those desiring to facilitate and catalyze professional learning accordingly then should be on connecting people and knowledge, on the basis of their wants and needs. This implies a pivotal role for *knowledge brokers* who can help to co-create, utilize, and mobilize knowledge between communities.[vi] The

main idea is that there is richness within and around any community—e.g., a school, a grade level team—and solutions and improvements invariably can emerge under the proper conditions (i.e., those in which participants are empowered to discuss, explore, share successes and challenges, test out and combine ideas, etc.). Perhaps the biggest key issue, though, is for educators to feel free to be open and vulnerable with colleagues who have knowledge and ideas, and leaders who may also be able to provide resource and structural supports: It is critically important for educators to be able to share what is not going so well, to share one's struggles, knowledge gaps, and insecurities, so that resources and ideas can be marshalled to rectify issues and make continued improvements.[vii] This in turn is why trusting, open, learning- and improvement-oriented organizational cultures are pivotally important, as are the leaders who are able to shape them.

Given this way of understanding, the development of a professional learning plan could and should involve, first, bringing people together to share knowledge and to identify individual and collective strengths, needs, interests, and areas for growth. And there would be a recognition and appreciation of diverse perspectives, ideas, knowledges—and on how those could be discovered, surfaced, and integrated.

3. Let's draw upon research, but in thoughtful and context-sensitive ways
This is based upon an understanding of research as "evidence that is the result of systematic investigation, regardless of whether or not it emanates from a research setting."[viii] Certainly, there will be many instances when research is indispensable for professional learning, and it will accordingly be important that learning community members are continuously scanning for relevant findings and concepts that can support professional learning, thinking, and decision making.

This can be fueled by the recognition that the world is now small and accessible, that there are indeed many useful ideas *out there* for consideration, use, and/or adjustment *in here*. But beyond just drawing on the rich fund of research evidence originating in the external research community, teachers individually and collectively possess and can (co)-produce a deep range of knowledge to draw upon within their own schools and classrooms. And again, it is the *integration* of these that is particularly potent.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the limitations and contingencies associated with research evidence, and accordingly to be able to take a metaevidential approach[ix] toward using research, examining its compatibility or incompatibility with their current focal areas, contexts, and ways of knowing. Fully embracing a high teacher agency approach to professional learning means aiming both "to ensure that teachers can make use of research but can also choose not to in as informed a way as possible."[x] The idea again is that powerful educational knowledge is invariably a blend of different knowledge forms, and that research engagement and use is dependent on greater dialogue, collaboration, and knowledge integration.

What this implies, too, is that a research-informed culture is a long-term goal—a culture in which practitioner and research knowledge can be cyclically and dynamically co-created, and

one in which teachers' and educational leaders' ethics-laden and judgment can be supported.[xi] It will likely be that in some cases, on a school-wide basis, it is not yet within reach to establish such a culture. But even then I would advise educators to think about whether and how to work within or establish these as sub-cultures – e.g., within one's grade level, content area, team, etc.

4. Let's look for opportunities to learn beyond the organization
As noted earlier, opportunities now for learning beyond one's organization are perhaps more abundant now than ever before. For one – and for better or worse – there is an ever-expanding array of educational intermediaries available to educators and policymakers.[xii] There are also many possibilities to join onto existing professional learning networks, and/or to develop one's own. There are webinars, social media platforms, teacher-to-teacher learning sites, evidence aggregators, and more. And there are non-educators who are interested in partnering with educators, for instance to enrich student learning opportunities by offering internships and work-based learning opportunities. Though it may be difficult to appraise and navigate all of these opportunities, it would behoove the members of any learning organization to be substantially outward looking and outward facing, and committed to sharing their learnings with colleagues. Doing so, ultimately, promises to increase the likelihood that new and powerful ideas will be taken up, and that successful school efforts will be transferred into additional contexts.

5. Let's put it all together: It will work!
One big, recent source of validation and inspiration for me: My advisee[1], Dr. Amy Brennan[xiii], was creative, ambitious, and quite successful (along with her colleagues) at reconceptualizing professional development as *self-directed professional learning* within her large school district in Ohio, USA.

This was a redesign in which teachers were given control over what and how they wanted to learn. In this model, each teacher (with support of their department chairs) developed an individual learning goal, and identified/designed the learning resources and activities that would be necessary to meet it. Department chairs offered supports and facilitated individual and small group check-ins meetings. Administrators, in turn, "provided protected time and resources, such as learning materials, funding to attend conferences, and connections to other educators in the building and region who could offer insights and support."

This model, according to the evidence she shared, had both direct and indirect impacts on teachers' instructional practices. She was also able to identify relational, structural, and cultural affordances that served to support teacher learning. Overall, her study's findings convinced me of the importance of:
- "designing professional learning models for all levels of the school system, recognizing the role of teachers' internal characteristics and external school-based supports;

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[1] Dr. Brennan was enrolled in our Doctor of Education program and I was fortunate as dissertation co-chair to be able to provide advice and feedback (and to learn from her!) as she worked to complete her doctoral thesis.

- articulating a clear shared vision for student learning and then trusting in teachers' ability to pursue related learning goals, and
- involving teachers as active participants and leaders in designing and implementing the model."

Getting better at getting better

Altogether, what I am envisioning and hoping for is that more and more schools and school systems are set up to continually learn how "to get better at getting better."[xiv] Above all, for some this may require reshaping professional identities, as 'analogical scavengers'[xv] or as 'omnivores'[xvi] who seek to learn from diverse sources within and beyond education about how to refine and improve their practices. Specific methodologies and approaches, such as improvement science and research-practice partnerships, are available to frame continual improvement work; here, though, I wish more modestly just to emphasise the importance of educators (and teams) first adopting "open, inward- and outward-looking disposition[s]/orientation[s]', which an essential first ingredient. In any case, such improvement work is complex, multifaceted, and highly meaningful, ultimately requiring trust, collective vision, positive- and learning-focused cultures.

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