

Moving Out Into The Bigger Sea

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This qualitative research study explores the catalysts in the continuum of teacher growth for elementary school teachers at various intervals of teaching experience. A small group of K-5 elementary teachers and specialists with varying degrees of teaching experience, from 2 years to 20 or more years, were interviewed and surveyed to determine what their professional growth looked like. Of particular interests were the types of activities teachers participate in most often, the focus of their learning, and the ways in which they choose to learn. The teachers who were interviewed were also asked to share examples of the types of materials and notes they collected from the various professional development activities in which they participated.

Results

For the teachers with 20 years or more experience who were interviewed, reading books and articles and discussing the readings with colleagues is important; but for the teacher with the least experience the discussions are more essential than the readings. And this brings me to one more aspect of the results of this exploratory study, the consideration of the theories behind learning and cognitive development in relation to teacher growth. Learning has to make sense to the learner and each new level of learning leads to more complex thinking. The novice teacher needs the support and guidance of the more experienced teacher to help scaffold the new learning. As this study has shown, all teachers need conversations and social interactions. It suggests that teachers' learning styles and their approaches to learning influence their professional growth. All of these

teachers are searching for their own strengths and ways of using their strengths to become better teachers. If the purposes of staff development are to help teachers be more engaged and competent and to provide opportunities to demonstrate various approaches to learning, then within these programs we have to access teacher through their own spectrum of intelligences. Therefore, a learning model for professional development should consider the implications of the theory of multiple styles of learning, the application of the impact of culture on learning, and the theory of spiral learning.

Just as there is no recipe or prescription for instruction to fit the variety of learning styles and needs of children, the same concept applies to teacher growth. Teachers at different stages in their careers have different professional needs. They attend to different forms of "cultural information". Sharing expertise, quality relationships among adults, peer interactions are all key components in the evolution of teacher learning. Therefore included in this model is Vygotsky's concept that dialogue with others is essential for cognitive development. A professional development learning model is based on the theory of social interaction and enhances teaching through the evolution of learning. When teachers are aware of what they are thinking, what they understand or don't understand, what looks hard; or when they ask themselves questions like, how am I going to do this? or what resources or strategies do I have to solve this problem?; they are learning to guide and direct their own behaviors through difficult tasks. Through these social activities the more experienced teachers and the novice teachers collectively build "bridges of awareness", understandings and competencies.

Evidence collected from the data sources in this study suggests that professional growth in the early years of teaching looks quite different from the professional growth of teachers with years of experience.

Informal and exploratory dialogue was evident throughout the interview data. Looking to more experienced teachers for support and guidance, demonstrations and modeling is where teachers begin, but what stood out for me in the interviews was that all four teachers mentioned the impact of their professional development strand, a monthly study group format, on their learning, suggesting that this form of supporting teacher growth is important to teachers. But how do we insure that this growth is not merely surface level change? As I look at the data collected from the experienced teachers it seems to suggest a level of reflection that is meaningful and lasting. Their reflections demonstrate thinking about the relationships between teaching and learning, and they are able to sift and sort through the complexities of teaching to judge what to attend to and when. This study suggests that teachers accumulate valuable knowledge from their experience, and we need to find practical ways for accumulating professional knowledge and sharing it through a learning model that considers the cognitive development of teachers at various stages in their professional growth.

References

- Freppon, P.A. (2001). *What It Takes To Be A Teacher: The Role of Personakol and Professional Development*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.